

From Whence You Came

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From Whence You Came

by [kanzaki19](#)

Summary

Do not take those you love for granted, tell them you love them. You may never see them again.

After being torn from the life he has lovingly settled in, Wei Wuxian finds himself back in Qiongi Path.

Faced with immediate threats he grabs hold of every opportunity to better the lives of his family.

Notes

This piece is complete and will update on Monday and Thursday

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Any errors are mine alone and are fixable, immediately, if pointed out!

Now and Then

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Lan Wangji does not believe it's boastful to admit he knows a great many things. It is simply a fact borne from the encouragement of his mother to learn at least one new thing, every day, since his early childhood. The lessons haven't always been exciting or life-changing, but he has, in his many days, accrued just as many points of knowledge and points of reference.

When the dark times leading to Nightless City —and again after the siege on the Burial Mounds— left him in a world bereft of Wei Ying, an unforgettable lesson was seared into his soul: Do not take those you love for granted, tell them you love them. You may never see them again.

After Wei Ying was returned to this world, Lan Wangji had not expected to fear that lesson again so soon. Nonetheless, here he stands, with a nearly sobbing Jingyi, all but collapsed on the packed gravel leading to the Jingshi, trying to explain exactly what led to Lan Wangji's son being rushed to the infirmary, unconscious but clinging to life like he always has, and his husband —who he'd had sharp words with as he'd departed Cloud Recesses just the morning before— missing, or more precisely vanished, into thin air in front of all the members of the night hunt.

“We were so focused on the first creature that none of us saw the second until it was too late. Senior Wei,” Jingyi gasps, chest heaving for breaths, “Senior Wei barely made it in time to push Jin Ling and Zizhen out of the way before that, that thing had its claws in him.”

Lan Wangji can feel his heart seize in his chest as Jingyi continues, “It was like time stopped, Hanguang-jun, everything in the clearing froze; there wasn't a sound to be heard until after the blinding flash of light sent shock waves reverberating throughout the woods.” He takes a shaky breath, casting his eyes to the floor, “The beast we were fighting attacked Sizhui while we were distracted. I'm sorry, Hanguang-jun, I should've remained focused on my fight, I should have been quicker. I should have protected him.”

Lan Wangji swallows, an effort made nearly impossible by the tightness of his throat, and hopes his voice will not shake when he says, “Jingyi look at me,” he pauses, giving the young man kneeling before him time to comply, “you are not to blame, you were all at a disadvantage, Wei Ying included,” he holds up a hand to quiet Jingyi's protest and give himself a moment so his words can be spoken with the calm assertiveness they both need, “You are one of the strongest of your generation and did everything in your power to ensure the party made it to safety.”

“Not everyone made it back.” Lan Jingyi whispers, wrapping his arms around his middle and curling in on himself. “We didn't even have time to look for him.”

Lan Wangji can clearly see himself in the depths of the Burial Mounds, a wrecked excuse of a cultivator, looking for a single sign of life or limb of Wei Ying. The results he's sure will be

the same this time as then.

After a heartbeat of silence he opens his arm in an offer of long-established comfort, “Come here, Jingyi.” he says softly and a moment later Jingyi collides into him, dragging his heart into the depths like a sinking stone — the young disciple’s sobs icy water filling his lungs and drowning them both.

Wei Wuxian startles, gasping for breath as he staggers forward a step, his body feels like it’s on fire. His senses scream that everything is wrong, that the brightness of the day is too blinding. The racing of his heart throbs in his fingertips and drowns his hearing. There’s a voice yelling at him but his brain is sluggish, unable to focus on the out of context words. When he forces his head up, his vision blurs, white and gold swimming in front of him as the man yells:

“Why can’t you just back off for once?! A-Li is still...”

Wei Wuxian’s fingers lock onto the expensive material before he consciously wills them to move, dragging the man against his body as he turns and kicks off to put as much distance as he can between them and the gathering group around them. A frustrated roar fills the air behind them, echoing from the stone walls even as the whistle of arrows begin to rain down around them.

A wet squelch tears through Wei Wuxian’s side taking his breath but the pained cry directly in his ear stops his heart. Despite the arrow now lodged through Jin Zixuan’s shoulder, there isn’t enough time to remove it. They’re surrounded by danger and he’ll be damned if he watches the peacock die again.

“Wen Ning!” He barks, then remembering himself, lets out a series of sharp whistles as he continues to retreat. Wei Wuxian is faintly relieved to notice Chenqing trapped in his grip; as useless as it is in this particular valley. He has no idea what’s going on but refuses to screw up whatever this might be by not capitalizing every opportunity he has to rectify the mistakes he made in his first life.

Jin Zixuan is yelling, again, struggling as best as he can to get free from Wei Wuxian who has a grip around his waist and is pressed against his side, but Wei Wuxian ignores him until they’ve rounded out of sight of the archers and are hidden deep in one of the many crevices that litter the walls of the valley.

“Shut up, shut up.” Wei Wuxian hisses, fighting the urge to shake the man as he pulls him further still from the entrance before finally pushing him against the wall. “I need you to trust me for a minute.” Wei Wuxian snaps, even as he makes sure Jin Zixuan is steady on his own feet before stepping back.

“Help me get this out.” Jin Zixuan barks and for a second Wei Wuxian is reminded of Jiang Cheng and his ever vibrant anger.

“Yeah, yeah. Give me a second.” Wei Wuxian breathes running through the basic field medicine he’d utilized during the Sunshot Campaign. The memories of that horror are fresher now than they were yesterday —decades in the future, and the thought makes his head spin. Shaking any distractions from his mind he leans in and presses his ear to Jin Zixuan’s chest. Wei Wuxian ignores the indignant squawk. “Take a deep breath, I have to be sure it didn’t knick your lung.”

“Damnit Wei Wuxian, what does that matter?”

It doesn’t, really, Wei Wuxian realizes, leaning back as his attention is drawn to the shouting growing closer to their secluded alcove. He’s running out of options and he’d honestly rather do this on his terms if possible. “When we get the arrow out, will you take us back to Burial Mounds?”

“Why would I go back to Burial Mounds with you,” Jin Zixuan growls, fist closing around the arrow as if to just rip it free, “when A-Li is waiting for us at Koi Tower!”

“Aiyo, stop!” Wei Wuxian yelps, leaping forward to stop his idiot brother-in-law. “Hold still.” he adds quietly, his breath catching in his throat. “I’ll, I’ll get it out, but we have to go to Burial Mounds.”

Looking down at Wei Wuxian’s hand pressed against his shoulder Jin Zixuan hesitates, “Why?”

Wei Wuxian’s answer is immediate, “Because if it’s the last thing I do, you need to know the truth about the people on that mountain.” He casts a glance over his shoulder at a close shout before continuing, “I trust either you or Lan Zhan will be able to help them.”

“What are you carrying on about?”

“Just stand still.” Wei Wuxian mumbles as he snaps the fletched end off, unceremoniously pulls the arrow free, then applies pressure to both sides of the wound. Under his palms, he can feel Jin Zixuan redirecting his spiritual power to heal the wound. Wei Wuxian, moving on habits from his second-life, reaches for his own spiritual power to help and is met only by thick, sluggish resentful energy.

The sensation knocks the breath from his lungs like a hit to the solar plex, he knew better than to hope and as selfish as it is, in light of the apparent gift he’s been given, Wei Wuxian wishes, for what is likely the first of many times to come, that his future core had made the trip with him. He shudders, forcing the emotions down and dragging in a deep breath as another scout runs past their hiding spot shouting at the others to follow Wen Ning, who has outpaced all of them and should be fully out of the valley already if he maintained his speed. He can feel Jin Zixuan’s eyes on him in the silence.

“What doesn’t the rest of the world know about the feared Yiling Laozu and his hoard of Wen cultivators?” Jin Zixuan’s voice is quiet and questioning, curious in a way that means he honestly doesn’t know but wants to.

Wei Wuxian laughs, he can't help it. "The fact that you're even asking is why I hope my trust isn't misguided." He shakes his head, sobering, then turns his sharp gaze directly to the Jin heir, "I really want you to be the kind of man your son will aspire to be when he grows up. I need you to prove that his sense of honor and loyalty isn't just from the Jiang blood that runs through his veins."

Jin Zixuan holds Wei Wuxian's stare but flinches first, looking away as the area falls into silence again. "I'll take you back, but you have to come to Koi Tower with me once I see whatever you want to show me."

"Do you plan on keeping my head on my shoulders or me out of the dungeon? Cause that's exactly where and what your great and wonderful cousin and father are gonna try to arrange." Wei Wuxian counters.

Jin Zixuan gives Wei Wuxian a once over and instead of answering says: "You expect me to carry you on my sword don't you."

Wei Wuxian accepts the change of topic with a shrug, "It'll be quicker than walking."

The fog around the Burial Mounds swallow them as they approach, Wei Wuxian waving open a seam in the wards to let them pass before sealing it behind them just as quickly. The sight of Wen Qing standing in the open courtyard when they touch down brings tears to his eyes, despite the fact she's wearing the glare she usually only deploys when Wei Wuxian has done something exceptionally stupid. Which, in this case, seems fair.

She gives him a once over then turns her gaze to Jin Zixuan, and asks in a clipped tone that allows no arguing, "How much of that blood is yours?"

"Umm?" Jin Zixuan says inelegantly as he glances from his shoulder down the side of his body that had been pressed against Wei Wuxian on the flight in. "Oh! What the hell?!" he growls, turning to fully face him. Wei Wuxian shrugs in a what can I say kind of way.

"I'll be in my room," he says to Wen Qing, then turns a sharp eye to Jin Zixuan, "Don't terrorize anyone while she's shoving her hands in my side."

Maybe after everything settles Wei Wuxian will be able to appreciate the shocked and confused look Jin Zixuan gives him, but for now most of his higher brain power is being consumed with more important tasks, like not hyperventilating before he can figure out what his next move will be while ignoring the implications of this being his new reality. And that says nothing for the sheer force of will he is using to pretend pain isn't consuming him from the inside out.

In the area set aside for his experiments, Wei Wuxian has lit all the candles available, forcing the shadows to the furthest corners. It's far brighter than he used to keep it, when he would regularly insist that the resource be reserved for more important uses than illuminating his dingy corner of existence. The remaining darkness brings a chill to his bones. He knew he was lost the first time, he just didn't realize how lost he really was.

By the time Wen Qing joins him he's shed everything except his zhongku, leaving his upper body exposed. In lieu of acknowledging the questions he knows she wants answered, he ignores her. It's easy when faced with familiar scars, both newer and long healed—that hold more memories than Wei Wuxian is ready to face at the moment—glaring back at him.

He feels her eyes track his movements as he holds the edges of the wound closed as much as possible to staunch the bleeding and clean the drying blood from the surrounding area. The arrow from the valley had torn across the area ripped open in the woods by the beast's claws, leaving a deeper laceration within the center ragged slice. It means one less scar but at what cost. When he's cleaned as much blood as he can Wei Wuxian turns to face her.

"I'll need to stitch it," she huffs, waving him to the nearby ledge where he goes without a fight, "you won't stay still long enough for it to heal otherwise."

Wei Wuxian slumps, not looking forward to this at all. "Yeah, I know."

Wen Qing gathers the supplies, threading the needle swiftly and giving Wei Wuxian a moment to brace against the oncoming pain. "You've changed since you left this morning," she says as she washes her hands in the basin of clean water on the bench next to him.

"Do you trust me?" he starts, "If I tell you something completely beyond belief would you believe it?" He pauses, testing her curiosity, which he can see is at least slightly interested, "If I asked, would you trust me Qing-jie?"

"No." She says simply, but her lip quirks in the faintest shadow of a smile. "Haven't you heard, you're a horrible liar who can't be trusted."

A chuckle escapes Wei Wuxian's chest, "Of course not." Oh, how he's missed her wit and sharp tongue. "Well I'll tell you anyway and let you be the judge."

Wei Wuxian distracts himself from the pull of thread through flesh by retelling the first time he'd lived this day, the horrors of Nightless City and how the siege that came afterwards was the end of all of their lives, "Except A-Yuan, Qing-jie. Lan Zhan rescued him." He breathes through a stab of pain that has nothing to do with his injuries, "He grew into a pillar of his generation."

Wen Qing finishes the stitches before she speaks again. "You're serious aren't you?" Wei Wuxian nods. "What would you have us do?"

"Leave. Burial Mounds is nothing but a mass grave. There is no future here. Once we get to Lanling I'm going to talk to everyone I know I can trust and try to make them see reason. If everything goes well there should be someone here to help move everyone out in a day or so. Lan Zhan will come, no matter the general decision, he'll help protect everyone here."

Wen Qing takes a measured breath and looks Wei Wuxian over again. "Do you really think there is a future that does not end in our deaths?"

"I believe if I can get the Lan or the Nie to side with us, Jiang Cheng won't have to worry about being ostracized and will give everyone asylum in Yunmeng; especially once he knows

the role you played during the first of the war.”

Wen Qing scoffs, “Or, he’ll order my execution.”

“Not before mine for orchestrating the whole fiasco.” Wei Wuxian counters.

Wen Qing hums and gives Wei Wuxian room to get by when he scoots off the ledge. He can hear her gathering the used supplies as he changes his inner robes and pulls his hastily rinsed outer robe back on; dried by a talisman he originally created over two decades from now.

When he joins her again he can tell she is still leery of the entire situation. “Nothing about this situation is ideal, but I’ve had plenty of time to think about this and I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if I didn’t try.”

“Have you?” she asks and Wei Wuxian nods, “Do you really think asking the heir of the sect that slaughtered my people as indiscriminately as they would a pack of rabid dogs is helpful?”

Wei Wuxian lifts his chin, “I have complete faith his wife will do everything possible to protect a group of innocent bystanders who were essentially prisoners of their own sect before being captured and subjected to the terrors of another.”

They stare at each other for a breath, “And Wen Ning, what happens to him?” Wen Qing’s suspicion fails to mask her concern. “Do you think they are going to just let him wander around without a target on his back?”

Wei Wuxian thinks of the seal he painstakingly created then implanted in Wen Ning one frozen day in the safety of Gusu. How they had cried, Wei Wuxian with enough tears for the both of them, when it proved successful. “I made an amulet that will completely free him from outside influence. He will never be used as a weapon against his wishes again.”

Wen Qing crosses her arms. “And you expect the main sects to go for this?”

“Yes,” he says, and desperately wants to believe it. Jin Guangshan and his lackeys will put up a fight but the other main family heads, in the future at least, are not cruel men. With their alliances, a large chunk of the smaller sects’ opinions were easily swayed. And if he’s learned nothing else from his second life it’s that honest communication and a little bit of transparency can solve a world of problems.

“You’re so sure of this, but what if it fails? What if it gets all of us killed?” Wen Qing presses.

“What I did last time didn’t work either!” Wei Wuxian snaps, “It only made it worse, and then you turned yourself in hoping it would stop the persecution but it didn’t. It doesn’t matter if we hand ourselves over or hide away in this forsaken place,” he throws his arm out pointing toward the door, “nothing stopped them from marching in and slaughtering everyone up here like cattle.”

They stare at each other for a moment, each not willing to cede control. With a sigh Wei Wuxian sits, exhaustion and pain draining what little energy he has. He can feel Wen Qing's eyes on him, her attention raking from his face to his fists clenched at his sides, to the fresh stitches hidden under robes and back to his face.

“What are you going to do with the Seal?” she asks, kneeling next to him.

Wei Wuxian fully deflates. “My ultimate goal is to destroy it,” he says quietly. “It doesn’t need to exist any longer than necessary, but there are important things I need it for.”

“Will they understand the need for the Seal when you refuse to turn it over?”

“The Nie will.” Wei Wuxian takes a breath, remembering the way Nie Huaisang wept when they finally worked out how to remove the threat from the sabers, years too late for anyone but future generations.

“If they demand you hand it over immediately, what will you do?”

“Destroy it. I refuse to let something that powerful fall into the wrong hands again.”

Wen Qing lifts an eyebrow but doesn’t continue; instead she asks, “How did you handle the seal last time?”

The memories hit him all at once, too overwhelming for words, finally he says, “Only half of the Seal truly broke the first time I tried to destroy it and the reconstructed seal was never located. We were told it had been used to uselessness. That its power was not nearly what the original was, but we have no proof one way or the other.”

“I think if you are truly worried about someone getting ahold of it then you should just destroy it now, and be done with it.”

Wei Wuxian shakes his head. “Doing anything with it in my current state is too dangerous, I can’t risk any more injuries, or worse. Not yet. I don’t want to try anything until I know I can destroy it safely and completely. Anything else would be irresponsible.” He waves his hand to dispel the next line of questioning as he stands and crosses to the opposite side of the room where he keeps his more volatile experiments. “Enough of this, there are more important things to worry about. Where did you stick the peacock? We need to head out soon if we are going to have any chance of arriving before nightfall.”

“He’s with uncle at the dining tables.” It’s clear Wen Qing is adding more questions to the list that will need to be addressed at some point, but for now she allows the diversion. Wei Wuxian hopes he gets the chance to answer them.

Wei Wuxian steps outside and glances around the tiny settlement they’ve created. It was never perfect but the Wens always tried to make it as livable as possible with what little they were able to scrape together. “I’m assuming my little radish is with Popo?” he asks.

“I sent word to keep them both at the river until we figure out what you’re doing with the Jin.”

“Then let's get this over with,” Wei Wuxian says with a tired smile, “I’m in serious need of his tiny hugs.”

To Wei Wuxian’s surprise, he finds Jin Zixuan, without his outer robe, in a deep discussion with a small crowd. He looks equal parts devastated and furious. Wei Wuxian watches from the back, listening to the difficult conversations and quietly reevaluating the man his sister loves.

A handful of survivors tell their story before Jin Zixuan notices Wei Wuxian. The moment he does though he gives him a once over then glances back to the gathered Wens. “If you’ll excuse me?” he asks bowing to the eldest uncle sitting to his right, who nods. “I could never ask your forgiveness, but if you give me the opportunity I will try to make amends.”

A murmur of cautious agreement fills the dining hall as Jin Zixuan takes his leave, following Wei Wuxian to the tiny lotus pond on the far side of the courtyard. “I need you to know,” he says with an edge to his voice, “I had no idea what was happening in Qionggqi Path, but this will not go unpunished. There was no reason for these people to be subjugated to the horrors they were forced to endure.”

Wei Wuxian exhales, he wants to believe it'll be this easy. Wants to believe that for once in his life a plan is going to work without a hitch, but he can't. He knows better, he’s paid with far too much blood for his naivety to trust anything that looks so easy. "If I asked you to ally with me to relocate these refugees would you do it? Would you go against your father, directly and without cowering under his disapproval and demands? There is so much more going on than what you see around here. This isn’t going to be an easy fix, and facing your father's wrath is what it’s going to take before all is said and done.”

Wei Wuxian watches a series of emotions play across Jin Zixuan’s face as he looks around and Wei Wuxian has to suppress a sigh. The idea of telling anyone he doesn’t expressly trust isn’t ideal, but his worry of being thrown in the dungeon as soon as they land is a real possibility and immediately negates the discomfort.

Jin Zixuan speaks just as Wei Wuxian takes a breath to continue. “My father,” he starts quietly, “has done a great many things I can not condone over the last few years.” He pauses to shake his head, “And that does not include any of his activities, or lack thereof, during the war.” When their eyes meet there is a fire Wei Wuxian would recognize anywhere. It's refreshing. “I do not want my legacy to be that I was my father’s son. I have lived in his shadow long enough to know the bite of cold will never be warmed by any approval or affection from him.” Wei Wuxian’s breath catches in his lungs but Jin Zixuan pushes on, “I know we have never seen eye to eye but your contributions to the war deserved more recognition than they were given. I can only blame my father for that... and the rumors of your power grab, which are obviously also lies,” he says, glancing around. He pauses and looks directly back at Wei Wuxian again. “If you allow, I will do what I can to ensure everyone’s safety. I know we’ve never gotten along, and you have no reason to believe I have changed, but I’ve heard the stories A-Li tells of her brothers and stories from those gathered here, and I want you to know I will side with you if you’ll have my assistance.”

Heat prickles at Wei Wuxian's eyes, hope building again in his chest. How many times had he dreamed of an opportunity to stand next to his Shijie's husband and know he was worthy of her love? "We don't have time for a full explanation before we leave for Lanling," he starts. His voice shakes, forcing him to pause and take a deep breath. He exhales and tries again. "Su She cast the Hundred Holes curse on your cousin. He wasn't the mastermind of the incident, that falls to Jin Guangyao and his ambitions of grandeur... or your father, more likely, using your brother as his tool."

Wei Wuxian waits for a beat to gauge Jin Zixuan's reaction before pressing on. "Your father is so power hungry that he can't see a future that doesn't include him having the Tiger Seal. He'll stop at nothing to accomplish this desire and using someone insignificant to raise more suspicion against me through a curse would be child's play to arrange. And because he is a man who thinks ahead occasionally, if he hasn't already tasked Jin Guangyao with acquiring and training cultivators in the art of demonic cultivation he will shortly. But none of that matters at the moment." His voice turns harsher, holding a bite he hasn't used in ages. "The only thing that matters right now is either immediately evacuating everyone or sealing the wards so the people on this forsaken mountain will be protected when those in power descend upon us with the intent of slaughtering anything that so much as moves." He takes a breath, letting the anger from the past wash out of him. It won't happen again, he tells himself, then asks, "Where's your top robe?"

Jin Zixuan opens his mouth to respond, but an excited "Xian-gege!" echoes around them drawing everyone's attention as A-Yuan barrels into Wei Wuxian's legs. "What the hell?" he exhales.

Wei Wuxian ignores him as he sinks to his knees, face shifting into soft fondness as he gently pinches a chubby cheek. "A-Yuan! Where's Popo? Did you leave her by the river?" The juxtaposition of seeing A-Yuan, grown and independent a few hours ago, yet innocent and chubby cheeked now, makes Wei Wuxian's heart clench in his chest.

"She's coming, we caught enough fish for dinner!" A bright smile adorns A-Yuan's cherubic face. "Are you excited?"

"I am, that means tonight will be the best dinner then!" Wei Wuxian agrees, pulling the child against him in a fierce hug. Behind them Wen Qing hands Jin Zixuan his now cleaned robe. It's then that A-Yuan notices Jin Zixuan. "Xian-gege," he whispers, ducking further into Wei Wuxian's chest, "why is a gold man here? You won't let him take people away forever like the other gold men, will you?"

Wei Wuxian closes his eyes and curls protectively around A-Yuan holding him for a second before speaking. "No my little radish, Jin-gongzi is going to help everyone make a new home somewhere better than here."

A-Yuan whimpers, clutching impossibly tighter to Wei Wuxian's robes. "A-Yuan doesn't want to go with the gold man, A-Yuan wants to stay with Xian-gege."

"Oh A-Yuan," Wei Wuxian whispers as he picks the boy up and settles him on his uninjured hip, earning an exasperated sigh from Wen Qing. Wei Wuxian can't begin to translate the look Jin Zixuan is giving him so he ignores it. "This gege will do everything he can to make

sure you don't go anywhere you don't want.” He rests his cheek on the top of A-Yuan's head. “Hopefully, Jin-gongzi and Rich-gege will help me make you safer.”

A-Yuan perks up, as expected, bouncing in Wei Wuxian's hold to look around the courtyard, “Rich-gege is here?”

Wei Wuxian sets the boy back on his feet with a soft chuckle to hide the grimace of pain. “Not yet. I have to go with Jin-gongzi so he can bring him back.” He pauses, combing his fingers over A-Yuan's messy hair, “Will you help Qing-jie while I'm gone?”

A-Yuan glances at Jin Zixuan, still suspicious, then back to Wei Wuxian. “Do you promise to come back with Rich-gege?” he asks after a moment of thought.

“I promise Rich-gege will be back to help.” Wei Wuxian smiles, eternally grateful when no one calls him on his wording, then kisses A-Yuan's head. “Give me hugs for good luck?”

They spend most of the flight in silence, something that doesn't help either of their nerves. When Koi Tower comes into view as the sun is sinking close to the horizon, Wei Wuxian, despite his hopes, wonders if this is the last sunset he'll see for a while. Shaking his head, he straightens. This isn't the time or place to be fatalistic, he has a job to do and a family to protect.

As they make their final approach Wei Wuxian says, “I know I won't have a chance, so will you ask Hanguang-jun to return to the Burial Mounds as soon as you are able to?” The fact that Jin Zixuan doesn't refute the claim urges Wei Wuxian on. “He's going to refuse. At first. His desire to stay and advocate for me will make him hesitate but I need him there helping them more than here for me. I need you to convince him to go, no matter what's happening to me.” Jin Zixuan nods then maneuvers them around for a landing.

In the final moment before they touch down Wei Wuxian adds, “Thank you. For everything you've done so far and everything you've said you'll try to help with in the future.” Jin Zixuan nods, the look he casts over his shoulder heavy and full of so much left unspoken.

As expected the place is in chaos when they dismount on the wide landing just beyond the open doors and Wei Wuxian finds himself detained and forced to his knees almost immediately.

“I am unarmed,” he says quietly, knowing his voice will carry no matter the volume.

“Let him up,” Jin Zixuan barks as Suihua slides home in its sheath. “He is a guest of myself and my wife and will be respected as such.”

“He's a criminal who tried to assassinate multiple members of the Jin clan and abducted you before we could apprehend him!” Jin Zixun's voice rings across the banquet hall. “I demand he be sentenced for his crimes immediately!”

“Sit down Zixun,” Jin Zixuan sharply dismisses as he stalks past him. “I went willingly and we are not executing my wife's brother during his nephew's full month celebration.”

The guards hesitate, their grip tightening before they shove Wei Wuxian forward, startling him out of his gawking of Jin Zixuan and his proclamation. His war honed reflexes are the only thing that save him from falling face first to the ornate stone floors. He straightens with as much grace as he can muster, still kneeling, the smile he always wears slipping slightly as he watches Jin Zixuan cross the long hall to approach his father.

A shadow of white and blue catches his attention and as their eyes meet from across the room, Wei Wuxian is struck by how smitten he really was with Lan Wangji. The relief he feels at seeing him, so young, is immediately washed away as the heavy thought that this might not really be his Lan Zhan fills the pit of his stomach. Nonetheless he smiles. He can't help himself. He loves this man in all of his forms and of the people he now potentially has a chance to help, Lan Zhan ranks near the top.

Lan Zhan's attention flicks from Wei Wuxian to Jin Zixuan, who speaks softly before handing over the small qiankun pouch Wei Wuxian entrusted to him before they left the Burial Mounds; his eyes follow Jin Zixuan as he continues to his father's dias before settling on Wei Wuxian again. There are so many questions contained in his look, but when Wei Wuxian gives a subtle shake of his head Lan Wangji smoothly stores the pouch in his sleeve and turns his attention back to Jin Guangshan. With so many cherished moments shared between them in the future, Wei Wuxian can practically see Lan Zhan's concern radiating off of him. He was such a fool the first time around.

“A-Xian!” Yanli calls, ripping his attention back to the here and now as she tightly wraps her arms around him. She's radiant, her golden robes highlighted with splashes of Jiang purple mixed into the stitching and layers. Wei Wuxian clings to her, the disastrous memories from his first attempt at this reunion stealing his words.

He has enough time to whisper, “Jiejie. I've missed you.” Then he's being hauled away from her. The guard yelling in his ear could be leagues away for all Wei Wuxian is paying attention, his eyes never leaving Yanli as she cries out and struggles against the maids—who have caught up—and are handing her off to Jiang Cheng.

Wei Wuxian tries for civility, “I'm not resisting, I only want to celebrate Jin shao furen's first born.” He lets the guards buffet him around as he's forced forward until his hands are pressed to the cold tile.

A crash at the front of the room snaps everyone's attention away from Wei Wuxian. At the dias Jin Guangshan is towering over Jin Zixuan, one hand pressed against the low table the other pointing accusingly toward Wei Wuxian who is being held just inside the doors.

In the hush falling over the room Jin Zixuan speaks up. “This can wait until after the ceremony, there's no reason to make a scene.”

“I will not stand by while that miscreant flaunts around cursing anyone he disagrees with. He will be held accountable for everything he's done.” Jin Guangshan's voice carries easily.

Wei Wuxian takes stock of the room around him, assessing dangers and escape routes. His options are, for lack of a better word, limited. Not that he would ever use them, he's trying to not look threatening. Briefly, his eyes catch on Lan Xichen before finding Lan Zhan again. He knows Lan Zhan will protect him but he doesn't want to put him in that kind of position without knowing all the stakes involved. And that is why Wei Wuxian shakes his head again when Lan Zhan takes a step toward him and the guards.

"Perhaps," Jin Guangyao says just loud enough to be heard, "holding him in the dungeons until we can gather the needed evidence would be the best course of action."

Wei Wuxian's skin crawls with the way he says evidence but the idea obviously sparks Jin Guangshan's interest since he glowers for a moment, then shakes out his robes so he can settle comfortably in his seat again, "Wise advice Jin Guangyao."

The order to take him to the dungeons hasn't fully been issued before Wei Wuxian finds himself hauled back to his feet. Just before he's shoved out of the door Jin Zixuan meets his eye and nods, once. Wei Wuxian can only hope it was meant as reassurance and confirmation that he will uphold his previous oath.

Chapter End Notes

I thrive on kudos and comments (emojis are a valid form of communication!!)

if you want to yell at me, you can find me on [tumblr](#) and [twitter](#)

but I'm most active here and in a few servers on discord, like [Haven](#), which is a wonderful writing focused server, and [Danmei Destination](#) which is all things, well, Danmei lol

Immortal Demons

Chapter Notes

This piece is complete and will update on Mondays and Thursdays

Big thanks to everyone who put up with me while I wrote this, your encouragement and assistance along the way mean the world to me. I couldn't have done it without you. And all the love in the world to [MsJulia](#) for making sure my love hate relationship with commas doesn't embarrass me and helped tweak a few areas to perfection.

Any errors are mine alone and are fixable, immediately, if pointed out!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It takes all of Wei Wuxian's patience to not shake the Jin guard's hand from his shoulder when the man clamps down, painfully, to draw them to a stop at the entrance to the lower levels. Instead he takes a steadying breath, steps over the threshold, and trusts nothing will happen to the Wens before someone returns to protect them.

The winding corridors beyond are solid stone and cold to the touch. His escorts make a point of introducing him, face first, to some of the rougher and slimmer rocks along the way and again it takes everything in Wei Wuxian's power not to fight them. The last thing he wants is to add fuel to the already raging fire of loathing contempt that the Jin's harbor against him.

"Look at you," the one on his left sneers as he slams Wei Wuxian's head against the wall, shoving him forward so the ragged edge of a stone tears at his cheek. "Where is all your feared power? Are there not enough lost souls on your precious mountain to keep you fed?" The other guard laughs, cuffing his partner on the shoulder like a joke well told.

Wei Wuxian holds his tongue, letting the guards have their moment. It's just bumps and bruises. Things that will heal if given time. Minor inconveniences when compared to the other real issues that need addressing immediately.

The dark cell they finally throw him in is located at the far end of the last passage from the entrance and it's clear it has been chosen because of its isolation. When the heavy door slams shut and the bolts slide home the laughing Jin can hardly be heard. Wei Wuxian knows better than to hope they forget where they've put him. He also knows no one will hear the struggle when someone inevitably decides to pay him a visit.

Breathing through the various aches and pains, Wei Wuxian sits down in the driest corner and makes a point of ignoring the passage of time, a task made nearly impossible by the steady drip of water from between stones on the opposite side of his cell. He focuses on his breathing first, then his heartbeat, until both are slow enough to concentrate on everything else going on inside his body. When his mind is as quiet as it's been since before the attack on

the juniors in the forest, Wei Wuxian reaches inside and begins to trace his meridians. The thick resentful energy crawling along their paths is sluggish, cold enough it burns, and all consuming when he looks too closely.

Choking on a sob, Wei Wuxian turns his attention to the wound on his side and directs the dark power to the area. Knowing he must keep the wound as clean as possible he slowly coaxes the energy to the stitched edges to knit the wound from the inside out in a facsimile of healing with a core. A trick he learned in the war and used deep into his second set of Burial Mound days. Unconsciously his fingers find the scar from Jiang Cheng, the memory of their fight playing in sync to the wound from Jin Ling he no longer carries. The look of betrayal on both their faces was nearly identical and all the more heartbreaking because of it. The tears, when they come, are searing hot, mixing with the dust and grime, and exhaustion long since settled over him.

He dozes, at first too sore and cold to truly rest, until sleep finally pulls him under long enough that he loses track of time. When he wakes he eats small bites of the rations from a qiankun pouch Wen Qing had forced in his hands just before he'd left and tries to not consider what could be happening outside. The second time he wakes, Wei Wuxian pulls a piece of oiled parchment from the pouch. With practiced ease he nicks his finger, scribbles the characters for a purification talisman, then crafts it into a crude cup. The collected water isn't the best tasting but it won't make him sick which is the important thing at the moment.

He continues in this fashion, spreading his rations further and further until they finally run out and the only thing he has is his spiraling thoughts and the water dripping into his cell.

He's in the middle of a nap when the door slams open for the first time since closing to reveal Jin Zixun's sneering face. Wei Wuxian wants to laugh.

"You think you're so special," Jin Zixun spits striding into the cell with a guard on either side. "The rumors of your death during the Sunshot Campaign were the best news I'd heard in months then you went and showed back up." He jerks his jaw toward Wei Wuxian, who hasn't moved from the corner. "It's ok," he adds, a hateful smile stretching across his face, "all cats run out of lives sooner or later."

Wei Wuxian slowly stands with his hands open in front of him. "I know it's a death sentence to defend myself," he warns, "but I'm not going to just sit around and let you murder me."

Jin Zixun scoffs, "Big words from someone cowering in a corner with no weapons."

"Jin Zixun, please, think of what you're planning before you do anything," Wei Wuxian tries again. "I mean it when I say I will fight if you try to kill me."

It's a futile attempt, proven as such a moment later when Wei Wuxian is forced to duck under the swing of one guard and has to spin around the other to miss his blade. The ensuing scuffle is loud, their aggravated cries echoing off the thick stone walls. The first guard catches a lucky break and lands a blow to Wei Wuxian's solar plex, pushing him off balance and knocking the breath from his lungs. He stumbles into the nearest wall then laughs, unable to suppress the humor in finding himself on the right side of the battle with nothing between him and freedom as he tears for the still open door. The Jin are caught off guard, confident in

their victory, and lose the vital seconds needed to stop Wei Wuxian from reaching the door first. Spinning around Wei Wuxian plants his feet and reaches blindly for the iron handle so he can tug the heavy beast to. The door slams shut directly in Jin Zixun's face as Wei Wuxian scrambles to bolt the lock. Their shouts and the pounding on the door fade quickly as Wei Wuxian runs.

When he can no longer hear their struggle he slumps against the wall, breath heaving. His hands shake as he braces them against his knees and, vaguely, he thinks he might throw up. The adrenaline pulls another laugh from him; he doesn't have time for this. Wei Wuxian knows besting Jin Zixun and his minions is one thing, escaping the dungeon will be another, but if he learned anything from his first, second and apparently third life, sometimes the impossible is possible.

"I'll let them know where you are," he calls into the quiet, "as soon as I'm topside, I promise." Jin Zixun's muffled, bellowing threats are easy to imagine as he takes off again.

The corridors are a confusing set of perfectly symmetrical intersections that lead to dead ends if the wrong turn is taken. Wei Wuxian is in the middle of backtracking an aforementioned wrong turn when the sound of a commotion catches his attention. On light feet he follows the argument hoping it will save him from being lost in the dungeon maze for any longer than necessary. When he's finally close enough to make out the words, the arguing pulls him up short. The voices are all unrecognizable so Wei Wuxian tucks himself into a small alcove just to be safe, then strains to hear what's going on over the pounding of his heart. Through the echoing voices he picks out his and Jin Zixun's names before everyone falls silent.

He can't help his gasp as another voice speaks up, the authority unmistakable despite the softness, "You will take us to him, now." Wei Wuxian pushes as far into the shadows as he can, making himself as small as possible. The absolute last thing he needs is to be found outside of his cell by Jin Guangyao. The noise of the group barely covers the rushing of blood in his ears as they pass.

Silence falls around Wei Wuxian before he slips from his hiding spot. The initial rush of escape quickly being replaced by the fear of capture. An imposing door comes into view as Wei Wuxian finds himself in the familiar entry corridor. There is no quietly checking to see if the door is unguarded on both sides so Wei Wuxian simply pulls the bolt free and swings the door open.

The courtyard beyond is quiet, cast in shadow but more importantly, empty of guards or servants alike. Finding a deeper line of shadows along a nearby building Wei Wuxian runs like he did in his first life, his feet following nearly the same path away from the glittering heights of Koi Tower. He's just landed beyond an outside barrier wall when an alarm rises. He feels magic hiss to life around the wall he's pressed against and silently thanks whatever deity will listen as he takes off again.

As shouting fills the once quiet night spurring Wei Wuxian on he plots the most efficient escape route. Knowing a nearby river leads to a small village that regularly hosts a night market he turns his feet in that direction. Running in water is both too loud and too

exhausting but Wei Wuxian doesn't have a choice, he can hear dogs barking and knows he has to mask his scent or risk being overtaken before he even has a chance to hide. The thought of their teeth sinking into his arms or legs causes his breath to catch in his throat and brings violent flashes from his childhood. Fear spikes his adrenaline and he feels his heart thump in his chest; but he cannot afford to let it cripple him. Not this time.

Deciding on the lesser of evils Wei Wuxian sets out along the bank. In the dark it's harder to keep track of the water's edge and it's not until his foot slips in the soft mud that he realizes his mistake. The current is swift, dragging him quickly away from the bank and into the deeper waters. Unable to get his footing, he fights his growing panic for a second until he's sure he isn't going to immediately drown, then relaxes and lets the river sweep him further away.

After a bit the roar of the water increases, drowning out all other sounds and the ingrained lessons from Lotus Pier warn of approaching rapids. Working diagonally, Wei Wuxian makes his way to the bank and climbs onto a rocky outcropping. With shaking hands he pulls the tiny qiankun pouch free of his soaked robes, a quick search produces a dry slip of talisman paper, and relief washes through him that the waterproofing spell held. Nicking a finger he scribbles a drying spell for his robes, then a warming spell to help the shivers that have settled into his bones.

Once he is warm enough to no longer blame the shaking of his hands on the chill of the water, Wei Wuxian digs to the bottom of the bag where he finds a wrapped bit of dried meat. Wen Qing must have hidden knowing he wouldn't go searching unless absolutely necessary. A sob catches in his throat at the fear of losing her brilliance again and he finds he can no longer sit still. With her voice echoing her disapproval he shakily makes his way into the woods in search of civilization.

When he finally reaches the market his nerves are shot, despite the crowds concealing him with a skill mastered as a child when sweet talking morsels of food from vendors was the only way to fill his perpetually empty belly, he has to force himself to look forward and not glance over his shoulder. A flash of red and black at a stall beside him freezes his heart, and the memory of the market after Lotus Pier fell assaults him. It's immediately too much and all Wei Wuxian wants is to get away from everything. Taking as deep of a breath as he can he ducks his head and forces himself to continue on.

It is both late enough and early enough that the vendors aren't yelling amongst one another, leaving the streets to be filled with chatter and gossip of the night travelers. As Wei Wuxian is contemplating the purchase of the absolute wrong foods for his current condition he overhears one such conversation a few stalls over.

"He's an immortal demon, I tell you. How else do you survive an arrow to the heart and still have strength enough to abduct a sect heir?"

The vendor hums. "I heard he brought him back though. Walked right into the reception hall like he owned it."

“But did you hear what happened after?”

“A group of guards said he wasn't in the cell when they went to retrieve him earlier,” another man interrupts, glancing around nervously as he takes over the conversation. “He walked through the locked door just like a ghost. What more proof do you need that he isn't one of us anymore?”

“Gongzi?” the vendor next to Wei Wuxian says, startling him from his eavesdropping. “Is everything ok?”

“Of course, just tired.” Wei Wuxian smiles and pulls out payment for the snack. “Do you know a place where a weary traveler might get some rest this late at night?”

The vendor relaxes immediately. “I do! My wife runs an inn just around the corner and I know she has some vacancies.” He riffles through a bag and produces a thick slip of paper with directions scribbled on it. “Since you've already bought from me, give her this and she'll give you a discount.” He winks as Wei Wuxian takes the slip with a bow and gives thanks before following the given directions.

The vendor's wife takes one look at him and the slip from her husband and is more than happy to set him up in a room. She leads him to the very last room and bows an apology that it's so far from the entrance and that the server's corridor feeds into the hall just outside his door. Wei Wuxian wishes he could express how neither of those things are bad for him at the moment. Instead he gives his gratitude and begs for a warm bath and asks if she knows where he might pick up a new outer robe at a reasonable rate.

“My son was about your size when he moved out,” she says with a smile. “If you don't mind it being used, you can have your pick from some of his old wardrobe.”

Wei Wuxian agrees readily, and watches as she disappears through the hidden door only to return a moment later with a basic set of work robes and the assurance that she will be back to retrieve him once he has had time to bathe.

When the bath is filled Wei Wuxian adds a talisman to heat the water more and dips a basin out to rinse some of the dirt off before climbing in so he can sink completely under the surface. When his lungs begin to burn, he raises enough to drag in a deep breath then sinks under again. He stays this way until his fingers wrinkle then sits up and scrubs himself clean.

He dries himself, taking care to ensure the wound on his side is healing well and isn't showing signs of infection, then dresses in the loaned clothes. He has to breathe through the emotions evoked by the proprietor's kindness. For one wild moment Wei Wuxian imagines staying here and working for this couple who would help a stranger without a second thought. He isn't stupid or naive enough to assume they don't know who he is, but he isn't arrogant enough (anymore at least) to pretend they know him for any of his worthy qualities either. As much as he hates to suspect alternative motives his current situation forces him to consider the possibility. With this weary unease growing in his belly, Wei Wuxian makes his way out of his room.

The proprietor is easy to find, hovering at the edges of the dining room. She smiles and nods toward the kitchen. Wei Wuxian follows her, aware that the uniform allows him to blend in with the staff and covers any suspicion that would have risen had he been in daily robes.

He desperately wants to trust her.

She leads him to the back of the property, across the small garden and into the personal living quarters. "His rooms were this way," she says, passing a few doors on the left before opening what looks like nothing more than storage now. "Let's find you something presentable, yes?"

They dig through several chests, pulling out everything from under robes to fancy outer robes, and all the while she speaks of her family and the adventures of her son. "He spent some time on the war front; always spoke so highly of the cultivators." She pauses, watching Wei Wuxian fold a robe and place it on a pile he intends to keep. "You saved his life." She finally says, breaking the silence. "It was just before the end. The caravan he was traveling with was ambushed late one night. No one was prepared. He told us you fought like a possessed man until every threat was eliminated."

Tears spring to Wei Wuxian's eyes and he has to swallow around a lump before he can speak. "My Shijie was in that caravan."

"You pulled a Wen soldier off my son and used the new corpse to fight off another before his blade could find a home in my son's chest. We swore if ever given the opportunity, we would thank you. As long as I own this inn, you have a safe place here."

"A-yi I can't ask that of you." Wei Wuxian breathes through the emotions crawling up his throat. "You have to know what the big sects think of me. If word got out that you willingly opened your doors to me your reputation will be irreparably damaged."

To his disbelief, she smiles. "Who's going to tell? I never brag about the people who cross the threshold, and I can't imagine you would tell anyone you don't explicitly trust."

They sit in silence for a few more minutes, the last chest open between them. "Let's get dinner in you, and then get you off to bed." She pats his hand and stands.

"Wait, A-yi, what about the robes?"

"Whatever you want is yours dear." She smiles from the doorway, "Now come on, I don't have nearly enough time to feed you as much as I want."

She settles him in the server's dining area and fusses until he simply can't eat another bite. The kitchen's are well past closing when Wei Wuxian slips back into his room where he changes into a full set of dark gray and tan traveling robes that are an almost perfect fit.

As the night stretches on around him he realizes he's eaten enough to fill his belly full for the first time in ages; literally and figuratively. He tears up thinking of the quiet breakfast in the Jingshi with Lan Zhan a lifetime from now. The argument that has now taken on a whole new

meaning stills his heart. “Did we kiss goodbye? Do you know how much you mean to me?” he whispers into the silence of the room.

The darkness settles around him like a suffocating heat when he snuffs out the candles. In the quiet, his skin itches with a need to move while his mind pleads for even a single shichen of rest. The resentful energy in his veins burn with the bite of a deep winter storm and is just as unforgiving in its wrath. Every noise beyond his room causes him to flinch, wearing at the already thin reserve of tranquility he has. The sudden loss of unconditional love and gentle peace he has grown so accustomed to leaves him on the verge of tears.

It’s still dark when the first loud voices reach Wei Wuxian’s room. He’s already moving before the crash of someone stumbling into a table echoes from the dining area. As he slips his door open to check the hall he can hear the proprietor arguing in her quiet affirmative way.

“That wretched man isn’t here. I have no vacancies. If he had shown up I would have turned him away at the door, who would extend courtesy to any one as foul as him? What kind of business do you think I run?”

“We still need to check, to be sure he didn’t disguise himself.”

The knowledge that he is now a full fledged fugitive on the run isn’t unexpected but it’s still disheartening. It also means the chance of Jin Guangshan backing down before Wei Wuxian is in custody—or dead—is unlikely.

When Wei Wuxian stumbles from a backdoor of the inn, the fiercely barking dogs beyond the alley are unmistakable. He holds still long enough to figure out which directions the threat is approaching from before racing away from the shouts and demands for him to come out and turn himself in.

Wei Wuxian sticks to the darkest shadows, making his way from one alley to the next in hopes of making it to the forest again. As he attempts to cross one of the smaller side streets he’s spotted, the Jin cultivator calling out his location for anyone within earshot. In his panic he ducks into an alley that dead ends at a locked door and leaves him cornered. He can feel his whole body trembling as he presses against the wall, his eyes never leaving the massive dog pulling at its lead with its teeth bared as it growls.

The handler is yelling but holding his spot at the opening of the alley; Wei Wuxian only has eyes for the dog. With shaking hands he pulls a talisman from his sleeve. He only has one chance. He knows this with everything in his marrow but to draw and activate the unfamiliar incantation means looking away from the dog and he’s already having trouble focusing on his breaths as it is.

Shaking himself, Wei Wuxian stands a little taller. He is the feared Yiling Laozu, there was a reason the cultivation world feared him and they were right to do so. This does nothing to assuage his fear of the dog but hopefully the talisman will give him the advantage of time he so dearly needs right now.

Wei Wuxian lets out a low whistle, pulling as much resentful energy from the area as he can and wraps it around himself. At his command it hardens into a shield to provide a buffer against the dog when it inevitably charges. He also hopes the extra energy will be enough to power the spell once it's cast.

The handler is close enough to clearly be heard over the barking when Wei Wuxian turns his attention from the completed talisman not even a minute later. Without hesitating he casts the spell, flooding it with every bit of energy he has and pulls whatever else he can from around him. Time stills as the world goes a bright blinding blue, then black, as the magic twists tightly around him.

In the darkness, he can't breathe and for a few heartbeats he wonders if he's gone too far. If he's jumped blindly and found nothing but a gaping expanse below him. He wonders if the resentful energy has consumed him like last time.

He only has another moment to worry before he slams to the ground in a different dark alley. The impact knocks what little breath he had from him and leaves him gasping. The inky darkness of the sky overhead is the first indication of distance traveled. The smell of spices, heavy in the air a second. Out of breath and shaking from fear and exertion Wei Wuxian curls in on himself. The world is spinning, with or without his eyes open, and he feels nauseous.

A scuffle on the street beyond forces Wei Wuxian to his feet. His breathing hitches around the pain that radiates through him, leaving his body trembling. The effort it takes to make his way to the end of the alley is more than a little worrisome and forces him to lean heavily against the edge of the building so he can peer around the corner. Seeing only a drunk man being led away, Wei Wuxian straightens, as best he can, and steps out. He wanders two streets before he recognizes where he's ended up, and the hope in his chest forces a relieved laugh from him. He's never wanted to see Yiling so badly as he does in this instance.

Wei Wuxian pushes until past sunrise, covering as much ground as he can despite his body's protests. When he reaches the stream that sustains their tiny home he finally collapses against a tree. With each Li passed Wei Wuxian could feel the resentful energy around him, agitated in a way it hasn't been since his first time there, building in its intensity. From this close, the rage is only bearable because of his history with it. His unease grows as he takes a back trail through the gnarled forest, his attention torn between listening for intruders and ignoring the whispers and screams from the ghosts gathering around him.

He can smell the destruction before he lays eyes on it, and nothing can stop the sob that tears free of his chest when he stumbles into the courtyard. His heart breaks as his eyes scan the area. Every structure that once protected his family has been raised to the ground, wisps of smoke rising from their ashes. Collapsing to his knees, Wei Wuxian gags, losing the contents of his stomach. When he's able to control his body enough to stagger away from his mess he finds himself assaulted by the mass of resentful energy that has stalked him from the stream.

Wei Wuxian can imagine a hundred excuses for why he doesn't resist when the energy begins to poke and prod, and infuse his body with its dark burning power. He's sure at some point his loss of control will come back to haunt him like it always does but at this moment nothing else matters. All he can think is anything is better than the silence echoing in the tiny village he'd sworn, and failed, to protect twice now.

The influx of resentful energy fills the gaps and holes the teleportation talisman left and when he doesn't fight back it surges in with abandon leaving him momentarily at the mercy of their combined vengeance. It's a feeling he hasn't suffered since the very first time he was here. With a heaving breath, Wei Wuxian stands. Around him the voices whisper and coax, reminding him that there will be time to mourn later, until then there are things that must be done. He listens and nods, the movement seeming like an afterthought, disconnected and out of his control.

A scoffed laugh snaps Wei Wuxian's attention to the entrance of his cave. "If it isn't the feared Yiling Laozu," Xue Yang says, stepping out of the shadows. "There's a bunch of rumors going around about you. I hoped we'd meet under different circumstances. Get to know each other better. But here we are." He shrugs, motioning to the ruins around them. "No matter, maybe now I'll get to have some fun."

Knowing the question is redundant, Wei Wuxian asks anyway, "Was this not enough?"

Xue Yang picks at his nails. "I did what I could. I was hoping for more resistance, though."

Wei Wuxian feels the anger grow, feels the resentment build and fester in his chest. He is saved from making the first move when Xue Yang lunges forward, Jiangzai's tip barely missing Wei Wuxian's neck as he dodges. The smirk on the miscreant's face sets Wei Wuxian off.

"You've always been too full of yourself," he mutters, ducking another strike and reaching for his waist.

Chenqing isn't there.

A solid kick sends Xue Yang stumbling backwards, but his keen eyes pick up on the situation immediately.

"Missing something?" he asks with a laugh.

Fueled by the resentment, Wei Wuxian smiles. "Haven't you heard I don't need it?"

Xue Yang scoffs as he shifts his grip, hesitating for a second before diving back toward Wei Wuxian. With quick movements Wei Wuxian forces the strike to land broadside against his bracer, easily deflecting the attack. The punch to Xue Yang's jaw is too close and too quick to be dodged.

Wei Wuxian presses his advantage with a series of jabs; the last, an open palm strike, lands on Xue Yang's solar plexus and sends him sprawling to the ground a few feet away. Dark tendrils of smoke waft around Wei Wuxian as he squares his stance waiting for the next attack.

Wei Wuxian watches Xue Yang stand, his attention so focused he sees the moment the killing intent—unforgettable from their meeting in Yi City—bleeds into his glare. Xue Yang sneers, looking so much like Wen Chao that for a moment the memories of hunting him down and

the things learned in that wretched city overwhelm him. When Wei Wuxian smiles, it's dark and rictus.

Xue Yang throws himself into the fight, his sword flashing in the hazy light. Forced on the defensive, Wei Wuxian wraps himself in a roiling mass of resentful energy. The smoke condenses into a solid mass, fending off lashes of energy with every strike. The physical attacks quickly prove to be a different matter. For each counter Wei Wuxian can feel his endurance slipping, his limbs growing heavy with fatigue.

Twisting to miss a jab, a searing heat tears across Wei Wuxian's abdomen, the stitches ripping free. The warmth of blood running down his side brings images from the war crashing around him and he bites his tongue before letting out a sharp whistle. The resentment tightens around Xue Yang in response, lifting him into the air to give a short reprieve, allowing Wei Wuxian a chance to recenter and regain his footing.

Xue Yang growls a curse as he struggles to free himself, his breath wheezing from his chest as he stumbles when his feet finally hit the ground. Still he laughs. "Everyone says you're a walking nightmare, that the dead bow to you. Is this all you got?" The child—Wei Wuxian realizes with startling clarity—dusts himself off.

For a moment he lets himself imagine letting Xue Yang live. He thinks of the opportunity a second chance would offer—what it did for him—but then Wei Wuxian remembers the stories of the clans this monster murdered. Remembers A-Qing and her white eyes that weren't sightless until he made them so. Remembers all the people he tricked Xiao Xingchen into killing. Remembers Song Lan, a fierce corpse with not only his life taken but his heart ripped from this world when Xiao Xingchen pulled Frost across his own throat.

No, today Xue Yang will get no reprieve. Even though he has yet to commit any of the crimes Wei Wuxian knows him for, it would be foolish to believe the future wouldn't unfold nearly the same if he doesn't take matters into his own hands. Around them the wind picks up, the bare branches quivering as they scrape against each other. The ever present haze shifts, coiling around the two of them as it thickens.

Xue Yang gives the fog a cautious look, and although he is wary of it he still turns his attention back to Wei Wuxian, his eyes focusing on the spreading patch of blood. He smirks. His next attack is lightning quick and forces Wei Wuxian to the tree line as he dodges.

With another sharp whistle Wei Wuxian shoves forward in an attempt to regain lost ground. They exchange blows across the courtyard, nearly evenly matched as the resentment bends to Wei Wuxian's commands. Wei Wuxian knows his options are limited so he maneuvers them until his back is to the entrance of the cave. Xue Yang is so caught up in the battle that he doesn't hesitate to follow Wei Wuxian into the cave he called home; pressing on even as the barrier snaps into place sealing the pair inside.

Wei Wuxian dodges around a jut of stone he sometimes experimented on to give himself an extra shield. Ducking further out of reach, he vaguely registers the sting of a wound on his arm, his adrenaline masking the pain. A nearby talisman allows him to light all the candles, illuminating the cavern.

Curiosity gets the better of Xue Yang as he looks around taking in the chaos that is the Demon Subdue Palace. “You really are a mad man aren’t you?” he asks when his eyes find Wei Wuxian again. A splash in the blood pool draws his attention like a whip. “Is this from all your sacrificial offerings?”

The awe in his voice makes Wei Wuxian queasy.

“I’m kinda sad I have to kill you,” Xue Yang says, slowly pulling his eyes back to Wei Wuxian. “I have so many questions that only you can answer.”

Quietly, Wei Wuxian pulls resentment toward him, snaking it along the ground, always in the shadows, to keep the element of surprise on his side. He opens himself to the current, and for the first time finds himself thankful that the ghosts on this forsaken mountain seem to hear his thoughts. He breathes through the burn as their power slithers up his meridians, filling him with more darkness than he’s had to deal with since his first fall. It’s fine, he knows now how to control it better.

This time he knows what the ghosts really want.

This time he’s prepared to give it.

For this he will suffer whatever comes.

“I’ll answer one question.” Wei Wuxian stalls, breathless and in pain as his fingers twitch on the table.

Xue Yang's eyes narrow, his brow furrowing with suspicion. The rustling of a talisman attached to the wall draws his attention like a cat to a feather toy. He smiles and Wei Wuxian knows he's out of time. “You're good,” he breathes in reverence even as he raises his sword. “How do you get it to do what you want?”

Wei Wuxian smiles. “I give them what they want.” He lets out a long low whistle, the sound reverberating and amplifying on the cave walls. Around them the shadows shift, coming alive in a swirling mass of claws and teeth and pure visceral rage.

The blade barely misses Wei Wuxian when Xue Yang attacks, a second strike catches his outer robe, the material splitting easily. The jab that follows only misses his heart because he was already spinning out of reach. Reaching, Wei Wuxian snatches the large stick he had been carving for one of the aunts from where it leans against the wall, it’s sturdy and straight and with a touch of resentful energy it’s more than strong enough to help in the fight.

They parry blows between each other, and Wei Wuxian, with little progress, tries to direct them to the more open space near the blood pool. On one of these pushes Xue Yang slams into Wei Wuxian causing the two of them to trip over a low work table to sprawl on the hard stone. Xue Yang gets two good hits in before Wei Wuxian can get his arms up to protect his face. With a low growl, Xue Yang drives his knee into Wei Wuxian’s side, grinding into the soft torn tissue.

Wei Wuxian gasps, the pain driving the air from his lungs. He has to get up, has to get out of range before Xue Yang gets his sword through him. He can't die here.

He can't die here.

As if hearing his thoughts Xue Yang leans forward, pressing his sword across Wei Wuxian's chest so the blade is laying flat but still digging into Wei Wuxian's throat. "Look at you," he tuts, leaning in closer. "Everyone is so scared of you and your parlor tricks that they haven't even noticed you're withering away." There's a new look in Xue Yang's eyes—interest, desire maybe—and Wei Wuxian hates him more for it.

Wei Wuxian's hate grows form and the resentful energy writhes around them. Smoky tendrils, rope thick and just as binding, snake between them tightening as they go. With a great force Xue Yang is thrown across the cavern, his breath knocked from him as he makes contact with the wall. The hollow thud his head makes as it strikes the wall echoes in the vast cavern.

Wei Wuxian staggers to his feet, clutching his side with one hand even as he leans heavily on the walking stick. Across the room Xue Yang stands, the motion slow and predatory. In the blink of an eye he's in front of Wei Wuxian again. The walking stick deflects Xue Yang's attack but misses when Wei Wuxian attempts to counter. With a growl Xue Yang lunges, forcing Wei Wuxian back. Stumbling he curses the pain radiating through his body and tries to center himself for a solid defense but fails. With his youth and energy reserve, Xue Yang easily shifts his sword under Wei Wuxian's block. The blade catches at the material of his borrowed bracer and cuts. Heat and ice race down his arm as the newly exposed skin, from the center of his arm to his palm, is sliced open.

With quick, practiced movements Wei Wuxian draws a series of sigils in the air and the spell flares to life. The explosion, empowered by his blood, is brighter and more intense than even Wei Wuxian expected. Across the room Xue Yang staggers back to his feet with his arm up to protect his face. He lunges for Wei Wuxian a moment later, determination written clearly on his face. They circle the cave again, and, at first, the walking stick proves strong enough to withstand the constant attacks. With a desperate cry and enough force to cleave through bone Xue Yang slashes down. Wei Wuxian has just enough time to bring the cane above his head, his elbows locked to keep the attack from striking him.

The blade sinks into the sturdy stick, and with a scream, the resentful energy hisses from the wood as the cane splinters then snaps in two. Wei Wuxian has no time to consider his new disadvantage as Xue Yang brings his sword up diagonally in an attack aimed for Wei Wuxian's side. Instinct saves him as he spins one half of the cane to block. The blade catches, shaving a layer of wood free before catching and ripping the branch from Wei Wuxian's hand. With a growl Xue Yang flicks his sword to dislodge the debris and drives back toward Wei Wuxian.

Twisting, Wei Wuxian ducks under and around another workbench. With quick steps he races for the other side of the room and scrambles around Wen Qing's organized table. He palms the closest item to him just as Xue Yang's blade strikes the tabletop, nearly taking his hand. Around them the shadows have begun to condense again, and to Wei Wuxian's relief he can see fully formed figures stepping out of the blood pool. He whistles, high and sharp.

The first blood corpse catches Xue Yang around his shoulders, the added weight throwing him off balance causing him to stagger into the arms of another, a third charges from behind and forces them all within reach of Wei Wuxian who, without a second of hesitation, uses Wen Qing's scalpel to slice across the left side of Xue Yang's throat.

Xue Yang's eyes widen, the figures wisping away as his sword drops heavily to the ground. His hands clutch at the gaping wound, trying to stop the flow of blood. With his eyes locked on Wei Wuxian he collapses to his knees, a gurgling sound that once might have been a laugh bubbles up as he falls the rest of the way to the ground.

Wei Wuxian watches until Xue Yang stops breathing then bends double to heave, his breath catching painfully in his chest as he sobs. Around him the world is awash in blood and screams as the ghosts continue to course in and around him. The urge to run forces him upright again but he falters, his knees giving out after only a few steps.

The stone is hard and unforgiving and Xue Yang's sightless eyes watch him as he falls.

In the void left from the fight some of the ghosts still rage, their appetite for violence and revenge not yet sated. Unable to find solace from an outside source, they turn on Wei Wuxian, trying to coax him to his feet so he can better turn his rage against those responsible for the destruction of his home. Tendrils of resentment caress his face, and smooth across his shoulders before running calming circles along the plane of his back. The whole time they whisper to him, their words, the same this time as the first, bringing comfort as they stitch him together again and try to coax his limbs to do their bidding. When he refuses to be manipulated the ghost's rage intensifies and Wei Wuxian shudders as the pain doubles when the resentment pulls away, taking what little healing it offers with it.

They thrash and rage and Wei Wuxian, injured and in more pain than he's felt in years, screams with them until his voice only rasps in his throat. He cries like he was never able to do the first time, heaving sobs that shake his whole body. The ghosts, ever vengeful, drown him in scenes from their death and when that's not enough they seep into his thoughts and drag the battlefields out with all of his old agonies and insecurities until he can't tell when or where he is.

Chapter End Notes

I absolutely thrive on kudos and comments (emojis are a valid form of communication!!)

you can find me on [tumblr](#) and [twitter](#)

I'm most active here and in a few servers on discord, like [Haven](#), which is a wonderful writing focused server, and [Danmei Destination](#), which is all things, well, Danmei lol

Sacrifices

Chapter Notes

This piece is complete and will update on Mondays and Thursdays

Big thanks to everyone who put up with me while I wrote this, your encouragement and assistance along the way mean the world to me. I couldn't have done it without you. And all the love in the world to [MsJulia](#) for making sure my love hate relationship with commas doesn't embarrass me and helped tweak a few areas to perfection.

Any errors are mine alone and are fixable, immediately, if pointed out!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

From far away Wei Wuxian hears his name being called over the sound of banging. He knows the voice and wants to believe he'd come to save him, but he's lived this once already and the ghosts have imitated Lan Zhan before. So he ignores it, curling further into himself in an effort to protect himself and conserve what little warmth he has left in his bones. The darkness closes in around him.

The next time Wei Wuxian surfaces it's to a crisp, cool energy coursing through his meridians. The feeling is so familiar it takes him a moment to remember it shouldn't be happening. When the coolness pulls away, Wei Wuxian laughs, tears slipping from his still closed eyes. He knew it was too good to be true.

"Wei Ying?" The concern wrapped around his name draws his attention, it takes a few moments to register his name is being said again and again. And again.

"Ahh, Lan Zhan." Wei Wuxian's breath catches as he attempts to roll away, pain racing through his body like fire. "I wish you were real," he gasps. "I miss you so much." The shadows pull in around him, their anger like ice in his veins.

"Wei Ying, stop." Lan Wangji says and Wei Wuxian wonders if he's hallucinating. "You're hurting yourself. Think of what this is doing to your core," he continues and the shake in his voice pulls Wei Wuxian's eyes to the figure kneeling next to him.

The ghosts surge through him, flooding him with images from the war where he and Lan Wangji fought over his use of resentment. Their rage seeps into the memories, drawing his anger to the surface and fueling it with their own. "What it's doing to my core?!" Wei Wuxian gives a hollow laugh that bubbles quickly into hysteria, then fades just as fast. Voice bitter he continues, "Ah, that's the Lan Zhan I remember. Should we go to Gusu and have your healers cleanse me of my evil ways?" Appalled, Wei Wuxian snaps his mouth shut.

No, that's not right. Lan Zhan loves him. He wouldn't want to see Wei Wuxian suffer. This might be the past, but he knows better now, knows Lan Wangji was offering Wei Wuxian sanctuary in Gusu under the guise of healing and reformation.

"Wei Ying, please." Lan Zhan's voice is soft but firm; his fingers are gentle where they scrub across Wei Wuxian's face.

Wei Wuxian's attention snaps to the rich red stain of blood soaking into Lan Wangji's sleeve. He follows Lan Wangji's hand as it traces below each eye and above his lip. Each movement darkens another portion of his sleeve.

"Lan Zhan?" he tries, pushing Lan Wangji's arm away even as his fingers wrap loosely around Lan Wangji's hand, holding it in his lap. "You're really here?" He hears the question in his voice and can see the uncertainty flash across Lan Wangji's expression. "It's okay if you're not." He pats Lan Wangji's trapped hand. "But if you are, I'm glad. I don't want to be here alone this time."

The ghosts cry and yell into the silence that stretches between them. They scream their demands and remind Wei Wuxian that he belongs to them, that if it weren't for their generosity he would be nothing more than a pile of bones on their mountain. They are the reason he breathes. The reason he walks. He owes them his life and they will take payment if he tries to leave again. Wei Wuxian remains quiet, ignoring the voices while playing with Lan Wangji's hand.

After another minute Lan Wangji says, "We should go, can you stand?"

Wei Wuxian looks back to the hand he has captured, his thumb tracing over the knuckles. "I don't think they'll let me go."

"Who?" And isn't it horrible that Wei Wuxian can feel Lan Wangji's protectiveness in that single word?

When Wei Wuxian doesn't answer Lan Wangji resettles him until he's held securely against his chest and makes to stand. The move jostles Wei Wuxian's side and he cries out, pushing away on instinct, his reaction sends him to the floor, his hand clutched over the wound. Around them the wind kicks up, a twin vortex separating them.

Wei Wuxian can hear Lan Wangji yelling for him. Can feel his power wash through the room in an attempt to subdue the resentment but it's too much, too much. Just like the last time.

Just like the last time.

"No!" Wei Wuxian rasps, struggling to his knees. "Leave him alone! Leave him alone!" his hand flies across the floor, the array forming around him in the blood from his side. It activates in a flash of red and the shadows in the room race to him instantly. They descend in mass and the fear in Lan Wangji's cries tears Wei Wuxian apart before their claws have a chance to touch him.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," Wei Wuxian breaths as the world goes dark again.

When his consciousness swims to the surface *again* there's arguing. He recognizes Lan Xichen's soothing voice and a cast of others he couldn't recognize if he wanted. Lan Qiren takes up the mantle, his voice louder than Wei Wuxian has ever heard; the words aren't processing though, his brain muddled and fuzzy from the resentment still clinging to his body. Then Lan Wangji speaks and the world is as clear as the waters in Gusu.

"I won't allow it."

"Wangji!" Lan Qiren barks, angrier at Lan Wangji than he has ever been at Wei Wuxian. "To refuse to aid an investigation is one thing but now you blatantly defy your elders? If you do not cooperate you will be punished. Do you understand?"

Bichen's unmistakable ring echoes as the blade slides free. "I will not let you take him back to Koi Tower."

Wei Wuxian is moving before the blade is more than a finger's width out of the scabbard. Adrenaline racing through his veins, he trips over his feet as he crosses blindly toward the voices. "I'll go! I'll go! Don't hurt him!" He won't let them hurt anyone else because of him, especially Lan Wangji.

"Wei Ying!"

"I won't let you!" Wei Wuxian turns into the pull when Lan Wangji grabs his arm and lays both palms flat against Lan Wangji's chest. The resentment chooses this moment to exert its power. The shock and hurt that crosses Lan Wangji's face as he's thrown backward, nearly to the blood pool, cuts through Wei Wuxian.

There have been very few moments in Wei Wuxian's life where time has slowed and every movement has seared itself in his memories. None of them have been positive, and this, he knows, will be the same.

The Lan cultivators react immediately, descending on Wei Wuxian with their swords drawn. When he turns back, his eyes land on Lan Xichen who is racing to his brother's side and as much as Wei Wuxian wants to follow he knows it would only make matters worse. He wonders if it's better to force Lan Wangji to see what his sect and family are about to do. Making his choice, Wei Wuxian lets Lan Xichen pass then raises a wall of resentment to keep the two in place behind him. Away from the fight.

"Release them this instant." Lan Qiren rages, sword drawn as he closes in on Wei Wuxian.

"I won't let them witness you murdering me." Wei Wuxian lifts his hands, empty of weapons and intent, closes his eyes, then says, "Make Xue Yang tell you the truth." In one great push he forces all of the resentful energy from his body leaving him defenseless against their attacks.

The first strike is a sword glare meant to incapacitate, when it hits he does nothing more than curl in on himself in preparation for the second cultivator's physical hit which follows only a

moment later. As the cultivator pulls his blade free, Wei Wuxian collapses, coughing blood. He hears Lan Qiren's order to stop, recognizes that it is followed, but the only thing his brain can focus on is the sound of Lan Wangji screaming his name.

"Tell him I'm sorry," he coughs, looking up to Lan Qiren. "It wasn't his fault, don't let them whip him. Please." He coughs again and slumps fully to the floor. "Hate me all you want, but don't punish him for his love."

As the world begins to close in around him Bichen slices through the wall of resentment, Wei Wuxian can't help but smile when Lan Wangji scoops him into his arms. "You have always been so strong," he whispers. "Make Xue Yang tell you the truth."

As darkness drags him into its silent embrace, chaos erupts around him.

Wei Wuxian regains consciousness to the sound of water lapping against wood and the smells of rich earth after a heavy rainfall. From somewhere else he can hear the sounds of a conversation but the words are lost in the breeze that cuts the heat of the sun through the window. He breathes deep and takes stock of his body, each ache and pain and the deep hollowed out feeling in his lower dantian. His tears are cool on his cheeks, making the fever more evident. He doesn't fight the darkness when it slides over him. Rest he thinks must feel like this.

The next time he wakes it's a slow process made comfortable by too gentle hands wiping across his cheek and forehead and soft words carrying on a one sided conversation. "...all I wanted was to visit but they wouldn't let me anywhere near the dungeon and the longer A-Xuan was gone the more worried I got. When he returned he wouldn't tell me where he had been, instead he told me to pack. Then you escaped, and A-Xuan was rushing us here."

He listens, drifting in and out missing bits as he goes, but he tries to listen when she continues. "...When the first Jiang scouts returned with news that you'd been spotted in a market village not far from Lanling I was so scared that you'd been found and I would never get to see you again."

She takes a deep breath, the sound of water being wrung out nearly echoing in the quiet. "Will you open your eyes for me, A-Xian? We're all so worried." Her voice catches and Wei Wuxian is so focused on the sadness he nearly misses when she says, "especially A-Yuan."

A-Yuan?

Wei Wuxian can feel himself slipping away, the world fading and fraying as it goes. He hears a soft knock at the door and wants nothing more than to open his eyes, especially when Jiang Yanli addresses the newcomer.

"Zewu-jun," Jiang Yanli addresses when the door slides open. "He's moved a bit more but he hasn't opened his eyes."

“Wen-Daifu said that is to be expected.” There’s the sound of a tray being settled on a table, the dishes being arranged. “I brought lunch, if you would like some before returning to your duties.”

“I would love to. How is Hanguang-jun?”

Wei Wuxian imagines a future where everyone he cares about is alive and well but as he drifts and the world fades back to black flames begin to lick at the side of his dreams.

The world is on fire.

There’s pain radiating from Wei Wuxian’s shoulder to his hip and somewhere someone is screaming. He thrashes against his restraints, sure that his life depends on it. When hands close around his wrists he lashes out harder, the pain intensifies with each breath. His strength quickly drains in the struggle but he can’t give in, can’t let himself be captured and tied down again.

Through the haze he hears both his courtesy name and his given name. The second is accompanied by Lan Wangji’s familiar energy. The screaming stops as he drags in a deep breath and Wei Wuxian realizes it was always coming from him.

His panic returns tenfold when he hears Wen Qing say, “Hold him still while I get the needles in.”

“No, don’t!” he pleads, eyes squeezed shut. “You can’t. I told you what was going to happen!” He forces his body into the mattress and in his panic he can’t stop the memories from the end of his first life from assaulting him. “Please don’t force me to relive your deaths. I can’t do it again, I can’t,” he rambles as tears trace down the sides of his face.

“It’s okay, Wei Ying.” Lan Wangji says, his voice quiet but strained. “What is he talking about?”

There’s a pause, filled by the rustling of clothes as more people file into the room.

“What’s wrong with him?” Jiang Cheng barks. Jiang Yanli scolds him, softly, a heartbeat later.

“He’s having a night terror. Give him a moment,” Wen Qing says, deflecting the actual question as she switches places with Lan Wangji. “Wei Wuxian,” she says—voice controlled like always—and Wei Wuxian only wants to cry harder. “Can you hear me?” When Wei Wuxian finally nods he hears her hum. “Can you open your eyes so I can check their dilation?”

Wei Wuxian lies there listening to the movements around him. Lotus Pier has been a safe haven his whole life and he knows if Lan Wangji is here he wouldn’t allow someone who posed a real threat into the room. It’s this knowledge that helps him open his eyes.

Seeing Wen Qing alive and well and in shades of Jiang purple catches him off guard but doesn't keep his breath from hitching on a sob. She makes quick work of checking him as much as she can with an audience then shoos everyone away to their own rooms for the rest of the night.

"He'll still be here in the morning. We can reconvene after breakfast."

Once the room is clear Wen Qing checks his bandages then sits on the edge of the bed, hands clasped in her lap, and Wei Wuxian, unable to bear it, sits up. For a moment she says nothing, instead reaching over to adjust the collar of his undershirt once he's settled.

"Wen Qing..." he starts when the silence lasts too long, but stops when she raises her hand and turns to fully face him.

Her voice, when she speaks, is low but unmistakably full of emotions. "Thank you, for this."

Wei Wuxian instantly wants to argue or minimize his involvement since he obviously wasn't the one to rescue them this time but snaps it shut when she glares at him.

"You did this Wei Wuxian, don't refuse the praise that is rightfully yours."

"Yes, Qing-jie," he says, then squawks when his acceptance is rewarded with a sharp glare.

"What were you thinking? When did you even learn something that stupid anyway?"

He reaches up to massage some of the pain away from his shoulder only to find it bandaged tight, "There was a night hunt, in the future, it was complicated but it worked."

"You do something like that again and I'll make sure you have plenty of recovery time to think of what you did."

There's no real fire behind her words, Wei Wuxian knows, but he feels himself blanch as the memories bombard him. He waves her off when she calls his name. "I'm okay Qing-jie, I'll be okay."

She leaves him to gather himself for a moment. "If I'm honest," she says as she straightens the small table and gathers her supplies, "I'm surprised they believed you."

"Huh?"

"About being from the future."

"I never got a chance to tell them." He shrugs with his good shoulder when she turns to him. "I didn't even make it inside the tower. They detained me as soon as we landed and hauled me to the dungeon."

Wen Qing's brow furrows as she looks at the door, "Jin Zixuan and the others returned before the sun rose the next morning. If you didn't ask them to come, why did they come?"

Wei Wuxian wants to shrug again and ask why not, but that desire is born from his years in the future, instead he slips his feet off the edge of the bed and slowly makes his way to the table. “Tell me about it? It would make me feel better to hear how the move went.” He doesn’t say ‘please, tell me everyone is ok so maybe the nightmares will go away’ but when she nods and settles across from him to make tea, he thinks she knows.

In the quiet hours of the night she tells him about the group of cultivators led by Jin Zixuan and Lan Wangji, with Jiang Cheng and Nie Mingjue only a step behind. Tells him how she ordered one of the aunts to hide Granny and A-Yuan away and how she and Wen Ning stood between their family and the cultivators. She describes Jin Zixuan approaching with his hands raised to show no harm and how Lan Wangji was obviously looking for A-Yuan and explains how they all agreed to tell their stories again as the cultivators helped them pack the essentials in qiankun pouches and prepare for their trip down the mountain.

“The most vulnerable were taken by sword while the others followed behind in carriages purchased by the Jin coffers.” She swirls the long cold tea in her cup. “A-Yuan cried the whole way here, cradled against Hanguang-jun's chest. He was worried you wouldn't know where to find us.”

Wei Wuxian smiles, his silly radish has always had the biggest heart. “I can't take credit for this.” He motions to the world beyond his room. “This has nothing to do with me. Jin Zixuan rounded up allies and brought them back, and it was probably Shijie who convinced Jiang Cheng after hearing the tale from Jin Zixuan.”

Wen Qing shakes her head. “You trusted him enough to bring him up the mountain to start with. If you hadn't done that, none of this would have been possible.” She holds up her hand to stop any argument. “We are better off because of your courage and there is nothing else to say.” She pauses to stand, then adds, “Now come on, back to bed with you. You still have a lot of healing to do after your little stunt. Speaking of, you really should have a conversation with Lan Wangji. I know he transferred energy to you so if he doesn't know about your core, I'm sure he'll put two and two together soon.”

“Actually,” Wei Wuxian says quietly as he lets her gently manhandle him back to bed, “can you bring me paper and ink next time you come to check on me? I need to send some letters requesting an audience with the leaders who helped.”

“The only ones who did not stay were the Nie. Chifeng-Zun took his group back as soon as everyone was safely here. I believe he is preparing the needed documents to confront Jin Guangshan concerning the conditions of the labor camps.”

A trickle of fear crawls up Wei Wuxian’s spine, “Zewu-jun and Lan-xiansheng stayed with Lan Zhan?”

“They and a small contingent are staying in one of the far wings. Until tonight, I hadn’t seen Hanguang-jun out of the rooms since they returned with you yesterday.”

Wei Wuxian has to swallow twice before he can get his voice to work. “Why hasn’t he been out? Is he... is he injured?”

“I don’t believe so. Why?”

Wei Wuxian shakes his head, surely they wouldn’t punish Lan Wangji outside of Cloud Recesses. He hopes their desire to keep private matters private wouldn’t allow it.

Wen Qing eyes him for a moment. “Something happened in your first life didn’t it.” When he doesn’t answer she simply hums and tucks him in with a nod.

Wei Wuxian listens to the sounds of the lake and contemplates his future and all the complexities that go with living a life that was never his to start with. Despite the immediate challenges he faces, the thing he’s most worried about is living a lie through omission. If he really is here to stay, the last thing he wants is to repeat the same mistakes. It’s with that determination that he snuggles in and falls asleep.

When Wei Wuxian wakes, it’s early afternoon and Jiang Cheng is sitting at the low table with a stack of work large enough to keep him occupied for days. He watches him read through a document then make notes in a separate ledger before moving on. He wonders if it was the same the first time. If these same letters were waiting for Jiang Cheng after the Nightless City disaster. If they’d gone unanswered in his time of grief.

“Do you plan on offering your help at some point, or just laying around not helping like before you left?”

The breath Wei Wuxian drags in hurts. “Do you want my help?” he asks, haltingly.

“It’s the least you can do,” Jiang Cheng snaps without looking up. “How else are you going to repay me for taking in your refugees?”

Wei Wuxian’s chest feels like it’s caving in. “Right,” he mumbles, not wanting to have this argument immediately after waking.

He makes his way around the privacy screen and has to sit, not because of the exhaustion crawling through his veins but because of the sight waiting for him. On a low dressing table sits a stack of robes in similar shades he’d worn since leaving the Jiang, but also robes of various rich purples and blues. Colors and styles so obviously Jiang there would be no arguing even from the most stubborn observer. Taking a moment, Wei Wuxian looks over each item, his fingers tracing the intricate stitching held by the outer robes and has to breathe through more emotions than he’d even imagined over some clothes.

With a deep breath he picks pieces to compliment a top robe so dark a purple it’s almost black and gathers water for a quick rinse down. It takes him a moment to get decent, his body rebelling against each necessary movement until he’s forced to breathe through the pain when he finally sits across the table. He smiles and tries to wave off Jiang Cheng’s scrutiny by grabbing the next item in the stack.

“Why aren’t you healing faster?” Jiang Cheng asks, after a moment.

Wei Wuxian shrugs “Is there anything specific I should be looking for in these?” he counters, trying to change the subject.

“It never took you this long as a kid,” Jiang Cheng continues. “Even during the war you bounced right back.”

Wei Wuxian keeps his head down, trying not to remember how many times he fought while bleeding from whatever wound he wasn't able to fully stitch closed the night before or how exhausted he was from the resentment constantly coursing through him.

Jiang Cheng scoffs and finally looks away from Wei Wuxian. “If you would have listened to me after we found you in the supervisory office the resentful energy wouldn't have been able to damage your core like this.”

Wei Wuxian hums, a non-committal sound Lan Wangji likes to use when waylaid by a sect leader who thinks he's been wronged even when the issue is a direct consequence of their own stubbornness or complete lack of empathy.

They work through the stack before lunch, finishing the last ones as Jiang Yanli and Wen Qing enter, each carrying a tray of food.

“I expect you to rest as soon as lunch is over,” Wen Qing says organizing the dishes from her tray. “You can write your letters later.”

“Letters?” Jiang Cheng asks, having taken the tray from Jiang Yanli.

“I have information that has to be shared with the sect leaders who were involved in moving the Wens.” Wei Wuxian glances quickly away from his brother, taking the stationary items when they are offered.

“Haven't you done enough?” Jiang Cheng asks, the bowl he was holding clattering to the table. “It's bad enough the Jin have a bounty on your head, now you want to bring more attention to Lotus Pier? Didn't you learn anything watching this place burn the first time!”

Wei Wuxian breathes deep, ignoring the sting of pain that accompanies Jiang Cheng's words. “I promise if you let me hold the gathering here I'll leave as soon as it's over if that's what you want.”

“I want you to quit being selfish!” Jiang Cheng barks, his anger not even curbed by Jiang Yanli's gently reprimands.

Wei Wuxian catches Wen Qing's eye and shakes his head. There's no point arguing with Jiang Cheng when he gets like this. “I hope you understand later,” he says instead, organizing the dishes on the table.

Jiang Yanli gets everyone settled at the table with full bowls a few minutes later but the tension is too high to be broken by small talk. The meal finishes quickly enough, thankfully, and Wei Wuxian is beyond relieved when Jiang Yanli gathers the dishes and tasks Jiang Cheng in helping her carry everything to the kitchens leaving him and Wen Qing alone.

“Are you going to tell him?” Wen Qing asks Wei Wuxian as he collapses on his bed again.

Wei Wuxian yells into the bedding for a moment before turning his head to look at Wen Qing. “I have to. One of the biggest issues we had to overcome was my insistence of secrecy and shutting out family. I refuse to live this life without him knowing.”

Wen Qing watches him for a second then stands, “Should you tell him before or after you tell the others?”

Wei Wuxian gently rolls over to stare at the ceiling, then says, “I think I'll tell him and Lan Zhan after I talk with the whole group about being from the future.” He breathes through a stab of pain that races across his side as he listens to Wen Qing move around the room. “I know it won't be like last time, but I'm still worried about Jiang Cheng's reaction... both of their reactions actually.”

Wen Qing nudges him until he moves over, then takes up his wrist. “We won't stay here if he threatens you.”

“I don't think he'll kick anyone out, he'd lose too much face.”

“You deserve better than he treats you,” she says, then holds up a threatening finger when he starts to protest.

Wei Wuxian subsides with a shrug. “He's always been like this.”

“That doesn't excuse it. You are still clearly healing and shouldn't be subjugated to that kind of treatment.” She pats the back of his hand—like she does Wen Ning—as she stands. “No more work until I say so.”

Wei Wuxian shifts around until he's comfortable while Wen Qing gathers her items. He wishes her a good afternoon when she leaves, then lays there listening to the activity outside until he drifts to sleep.

It's dark out when Wei Wuxian startles awake. In the near silence he fights his breathing, trying to calm himself enough that he'll be able to hear whatever threat must be near. It feels like forever, but can't be more than a moment before he hears the noise again, a soft whimper accompanying a thud this time. Carefully Wei Wuxian makes his way across the room and opens the door to find A-Yuan pressed where the seam would be, looking up with wide eyes. The moonlight overhead catches on unshed tears and soft gray sleep robes.

“Radish,” he whispers as he catches the toddler when he tumbles in. “Why are you wandering around by yourself?”

“I missed you.” A-Yuan sniffles miserably and clings to Wei Wuxian's legs. It's sweet but heartbreaking as Wei Wuxian gently wipes the tears from A-Yuan's cheeks.

“Come on, back to bed with you.” he lays a hand on his head and A-Yuan cries out, clinging tighter. “Oh, no, don't cry baobei. I wasn't going to make you leave.” he kneels down so they

are eye level. “As long as it’s safe, you’re always welcome wherever I am, ok?” he waits for A-Yuan to nod before maneuvering them back to bed and under the covers.

A-Yuan, a warm weight on his uninjured side, takes only a bit longer to calm down enough for sleep to settle around his tiny frame. All the while Wei Wuxian keeps vigil, humming his and Lan Wangji’s song until even his eyes are too heavy to keep open.

There’s yelling the next time Wei Wuxian wakes. The panicked shouts don’t make any sense at first, his brain unable to focus beyond a pain blooming in his chest as vivid images of Lotus Pier burning under the Wen Attack fill his mind. A gentle series of pats on his shoulder snaps his attention to the present.

He sits up with a groan as A-Yuan asks, “Why is everyone calling for me?”

“Ah shit,” he hisses, scooting off the bed and making his way to the door to explain the situation to the first person he can catch.

He sits with A-Yuan pressed against his side as news of his safety spreads. While they wait he explains why everyone was so scared, and how important it is for A-Yuan to not wander alone, he whispers fantastical stories until the toddler is giggling again.

He pauses when Wen Qing arrives, furious and more terrified than Wei Wuxian has seen her since she found him after the war. She sweeps A-Yuan up into her arms, and Wei Wuxian can do nothing but watch as she looks him over like any mother would their own child. “You’re going to be an amazing mother one day,” he says instead of wondering if his mother ever did the same for him.

A-Yuan stays with Wei Wuxian, playing at the table as he writes his requests for an audience. When he finishes they practice writing until Wen Qing arrives with a messenger, who takes the letter addressed to Nie Mingjue. Granny arrives just before lunch to take A-Yuan and Wei Wuxian lets him go with a hug and a promise of seeing him later.

As soon as he is alone he slips out the back and wanders the shoreline. He doesn't mean to end up near the far wing where the Lan contingent are staying, but it happens and he refuses to feel guilty when one of the cultivators catches sight of him near the water's edge and immediately turns to alert Zewu-jun and Lan Qiren. He makes his way back to the wooden walkway and sits, unmoving as he waits. He isn't surprised when it's Lan Xichen who joins him a few minutes later.

“Shufu performed Empathy on Xue Yang. His witness testimony will be used once we have more evidence to confront Jin Guangshan about several incidents we learned about.”

Wei Wuxian nods. “It won't hold but at least you'll know the truth.”

Lan Xichen hums and they sit in silence for a moment, “Nie Mingjue should be back tonight or tomorrow. We will fill him in before we all start toward Lanling.”

Wei Wuxian chuckles, it's a hollow thing that earns him a concerned look "I'm not usually this fortunate." He pulls two of the sealed letters from his robes and looks at them for a moment. "I thought I'd have more time but this is better." He hands the neatly folded pages over, Lan Zhan's on top. "Will you grant this unworthy one a favor by delivering this to your brother? I figure he was placed in seclusion until you can all return to Cloud Recesses to determine his exact punishment for defending me."

Lan Xichen watches Wei Wuxian for a moment. "In the cave, you spoke of punishments and you reference them again here, why are you concerned with Wangji's discipline?"

"Because I've seen the aftermath of the Lan discipline whip when your clan decides to make those punished suffer through the pain of a slow healing, and I refuse to sit idly by and let it happen again."

Wei Wuxian watches as his once future brother-in-law's face shutters, the anger that seeps into his eyes like acid is new and shows exactly how much he'd changed over the years, "Do you believe we would subject Wangji to something like that for merely *associating* with you?"

"Do not befriend evil," Wei Wuxian quotes as he stands. "The elders' decision is law, and rarely overturned. And I believe if pushed, Lan Zhan would face his family with Bichen drawn and not stop until made to do so." He bows, then adds, "Please, read the letters tonight, before Chifeng-Zun arrives, if possible." He leaves Lan Xichen sitting on the boardwalk's edge, and can feel the heat of his eyes following him until he's fully out of view.

His winding path unsurprisingly takes him to Jiang Cheng's office and when his knock goes unanswered, Wei Wuxian slips in to drop the letter on the center of the cluttered desk. Jiang Cheng is waiting, arms crossed, when he turns around.

"Where have you been?" His voice is sharp but Wei Wuxian catches the way Jiang Cheng's eyes track over his body; assessing him like he used to during the war.

"The water's edge, I needed to stretch my legs."

"And you can't be bothered to ask someone to go with you? What if something happened?"

Wei Wuxian wants to point out he's spent nearly as much time in the water as Jiang Cheng but he knows that's not what his brother is referring to, so instead he says, "If their assassins make it this far in, you have bigger problems than my death."

There's a heartbeat of silence then Jiang Cheng explodes, advancing on Wei Wuxian, "Do you think this is a joke? Jin Guangshan isn't going to stop until you're dead or in his dungeon. Do you not understand that? I've already received two letters from Jin Guangyao requesting information on what happened at the Burial Mounds and an audience in Lanling as soon as possible. They are undoubtedly tracking you, and instead of staying put you're out wandering around alone!"

Wei Wuxian knows in his heart of hearts he would have risen to the argument in his first life, would have made a sarcastic comment or lashed out and yelled just as loudly for just as long

to press whatever button needed to be pressed to be left alone. But he isn't the same man he once was, so instead, he does something he has wanted to do for decades. He hugs his brother. Fiercely. With no intent of letting go until he's made to do so.

Jiang Cheng stands there with his arms at his sides and the reversal of their actions brings memories from the supervisory office crashing around Wei Wuxian. He ignores the pain coursing through his body and tries not to compare the moments or think about how this might be the last time too. When Jiang Cheng's arms finally wrap around him it's with no regard to any injuries.

They stand there uncaring for the world around them until both of their faces are dry again.

"You're a nuisance." Jiang Cheng says, stepping away, then orders, "Sit, I'll have some tea brought and you can help with the stack of correspondence we didn't finish."

Wei Wuxian makes himself as comfortable as possible and spends the rest of the afternoon working across from his brother.

Wei Wuxian is exhausted when he makes it back to his rooms. The deep pain that has been building since he walked away from Lan Xichen makes each breath harder than the last but he refuses to be herded back to bed when he finds A-Yuan playing at the table.

"If I sit still won't it be the same no matter where I sit?" he asks, knowing that's not how it works but also not caring as he leans over to pull a toy away from the edge of the table.

Wen Qing's "No." is emphatic but she doesn't tell him to move so he stays put. When she joins them she has a tray full of elixirs and a pot full of something definitely medicinal.

"I'm not going to like any of that, am I?" he asks, slumping over and causing A-Yuan to giggle loudly.

Undeterred, she focuses on mixing the powders into the pot. "It's no worse than what you were taking on the mountain."

A-Yuan pats his cheek and Wei Wuxian smiles, capturing the tiny hand to nibble on its fingers; a shriek of laughter fills the room and warms his heart. Wen Qing lets him use A-Yuan to procrastinate until the toddler is exhausted and snuggled in Wei Wuxian's lap.

"Are you planning on ever using resentful energy again?" she asks, sliding the tray across the table.

"Absolutely," he answers, then drains the first cup and follows with the second immediately after. "But not until after this mess settles down. Turning popular opinion is easier when I'm nothing more than a normal man."

Wen Qing eyes him for a moment and Wei Wuxian can basically hear her skepticism. "And if they decide you're more trouble than you're worth?"

Wei Wuxian shrugs. “Then I make it worth their while to keep me alive.”

“You don’t owe them anything,” she snaps and Wei Wuxian can’t help but smile.

“I don’t.” He agrees, patting her hand. “But I don’t think it will come to anything so dramatic.”

She hums her dislike and Wei Wuxian has to take a moment to control the heat that builds behind his eyes. He has missed her nearly as much as he missed Shijie.

“Finish the pot then get some sleep, you’re going to have a big day tomorrow and need all the help you can get.” Wen Qing pats his hand as she collects A-Yuan. Leaving him at the table to sort out his emotions on his own.

In the growing darkness he settles on the bed and stares at the ceiling. When he finally falls asleep, his thoughts are so full of bloody memories they saturate his dreams and breed nightmares before the moon has time to rise.

Chapter End Notes

I absolutely thrive on kudos and comments (emojis are a valid form of communication!!)

you can find me on [tumblr](#) and [twitter](#)

I'm most active here and in a few servers on discord, like [Haven](#), which is a wonderful writing focused server, and [Danmei Destination](#), which is all things, well, Danmei lol

Truths

Chapter Notes

This piece is complete and will update on Mondays and Thursdays

Big thanks to everyone who put up with me while I wrote this, your encouragement and assistance along the way mean the world to me. I couldn't have done it without you. And all the love in the world to [MsJulia](#) for making sure my love hate relationship with commas doesn't embarrass me and helped tweak a few areas to perfection.

Any errors are mine alone and are fixable, immediately, if pointed out!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Nie Mingjue arrives just before midday, forgoing anything more than the essential pleasantries warranted by his position before requesting he be shown to Wei Wuxian's rooms. "I expected you to be waiting in the throne room," he comments looking around the cluttered sitting area. "Your messenger was lucky to catch us on the way here."

"I'm glad he did," Wei Wuxian says, hissing as stitches pull when he reaches for the tea pot with the wrong arm and has to correct the movement before pouring tea for the intimidating sect leader—sleep the previous night had been nearly nonexistent, plagued with nightmares that left him tossing and turning until he succeeded in injuring himself further.

Nie Mingjue lifts the cup. "Jin Guangshan knows you're here."

Wei Wuxian nods. "I was never hidden. There are only a few places I would have run."

"Rumor is, the only thing keeping Jin Guangshan from sending his guards to collect you is what limited moderation Jin Guangyao has managed to impart on the situation and Jin Zixuan's presence here." He takes a sip of tea, then continues, "I didn't think the two of you were on such close terms." The inflection in the statement is clear. Nie Mingjue is here for answers.

"We aren't. Not really."

Nie Mingjue motions behind him. "How would you explain all of this then?"

"Maybe he's a decent man, or maybe my shijie is a good influence on him and he finally found a reason to stand up against his dad." Wei Wuxian takes the look aimed at him without flinching.

Before either can break the silence that falls around them, Wen Qing enters with clean dressings and a variety of ointments. "Chifeng-zun." She addresses Nie Mingjue with a nod,

then turns her attention to Wei Wuxian. “If you plan on holding this gathering after the next meal I need to treat your injuries now since you refused this morning.”

Wei Wuxian can’t be mad at her for calling him out. “Delaying didn’t kill me, honestly I tried to sleep in, Chifeng-zun, you’re free to stay and watch Wen Qing bully me if you want. Lunch with the others would probably be more enjoyable though,” he says with a laugh as he nods over his shoulder at the room behind him. “I’m sadly on bed rest and not supposed to leave these cozy accommodations.”

Nie Mingjue watches the two of them for a moment. “I’ll take lunch with the others so you may have privacy.”

When the footfalls have died away, Wei Wuxian starts loosening his robes to completely expose his upper body. The heat around the stitches is unmistakable and he wonders if forgoing all resentful energy was such a good idea.

Wen Qing prods around the edge of the wound. “Wei Wuxian, this isn’t healing.”

“Honestly,” Wei Wuxian says, twisting as best he can to see his side. “It feels like it’s actively draining my energy.” She shoots him a look that clearly expresses her displeasure over this new bit of information, especially with his recent activities.

“That is information I need, Wei Wuxian,” she snaps. “Did your little adventure around the lake make it worse yesterday?”

“There’s been a constant haze of exhaustion and pain since I woke up here. Maybe even since I found myself in the valley. I’ve just been ignoring it as much as I can.”

Wen Qing takes a deep breath, exhales slowly, then glances up at him with narrowed eyes, “As soon as you tell them, I want you back in bed.” Her hand snaps up to stop his protest. “No. I don’t care what happens, you need to rest so we can figure out if there’s a curse associated with the original wound.”

“I’ve already run a whole battery of tests and I haven’t picked up a single trace of a curse.” Wei Wuxian prods just beyond the stitches where his skin fades from red to tan. “I think,” he starts quietly, “this is my body’s way of rejecting the time jump.”

When Wen Qing speaks her voice is softer. “Or it’s just infected and you’re being dramatic. Either way you will be on bed rest until I say so.”

“Alright, Qing-jie,” he says and can’t help but smile.

Wen Qing has just enough time to tie off the new dressing before Jiang Cheng unceremoniously slides the door open to Wei Wuxian’s room and leads the small group inside. Wei Wuxian remains seated, rearranging his robes and using the act to procrastinate the whole event.

“You have us all here, now get on with it,” Jiang Cheng snaps as soon as everyone has filed in, it’s clear his mood has soured since they parted the night before. “We don’t have the luxury to wait while you kill time. Jiang scouts spotted a small group of Jin cultivators headed this way.”

A sharp pain crawls across Wei Wuxian’s chest and he contemplates calling the whole thing off, or using the overwhelming exhaustion as an excuse to only tell the absolutely necessary bits. But that would be the coward’s way out and he knows everyone here deserves to know what happened in his future.

Standing he looks around at everyone and knows it's now or never. He wonders if he should direct them to sit or if it's better to stand. Then decides it doesn't really matter, and takes a deep breath in an attempt to center himself. He knows he’s safe. He has on more than one occasion in the future sat with most of the people in the room for tea or dinner or joined them on night hunts full of lively debates. And if his personal interactions with their future selves are not enough, it is this group of leaders who moved the Wen without him having to beg or plead.

He exhales as Lan Xichen quietly interrupts the moment. “Wei Wuxian?”

Wei Wuxian forces his hands to uncurl and bows. “Right, my apologies, I'll get right to the point.” His smile is weak and the worry or suspicion on each of the faces that watch him is unmistakable. He notes how they have, consciously or unconsciously, formed a semi circle between him and the door, as if he's an escape risk needing to be guarded at all times. He assumes, from their point of view, he is.

“What I have to say will sound fanciful and completely unbelievable, but I need you to trust me and hold any questions until the end.” He pauses in hopes of calming his heart; it doesn’t work. “If I stop, I don’t know if I’ll be able to start again.”

“A-Xian, you're scaring me,” Yanli whispers.

Wei Wuxian turns his full attention to her for a moment. “I know Shijie, I'm sorry. What I’m about to say isn’t going to be pleasant, but this is something everyone needs to hear.”

Jin Zixuan wraps his arm around her, pulling her close as Wei Wuxian takes another deep breath and begins with Mo Xuanyu at Mo Manor.

No one interrupts him, they are either too speechless or too suspicious, he doubts the courtesy is from respect. He tries to keep his emotions in check, to be as clinical as possible, but fails spectacularly the longer he talks. Fearful of manipulating any feelings Lan Wangji currently has, or doesn't have, he skirts the details of their relationship and instead focuses on the ghost sword investigation. By the time the story rounds toward the temple showdown and the revelation that Nie Mingjue was killed for no other reason than Jin Guanshan saw him as an inconvenience, Wei Wuxian can't keep eye contact with any of them. He doesn’t know when he started to curl in on himself, arms wrapped so tightly around his ribs he can’t pull a full breath. It’s been minutes, he knows, and he’s positive at the rate he’s going he’ll

hyperventilate before he finishes. He wishes he could tone down the violence, lessen the pain for the others and also for himself, but too many details would be lost if he did. So he presses on.

“We laid both bodies together, sealing the first coffin inside a larger, firmer coffin secured with seventy-two mahogany nails, then buried it all deep underground.” He takes a stuttering breath, then has to take another before he can continue. “There was so much pain and heartache, so much needless loss.” His voice fades at the end as chills shudder through his whole body, everything hurts so much. The pain from earlier now wraps fully around his chest, and radiates throughout the rest of his body.

“A-Xian,” Yanli whispers, “you said you were brought back, how did you die the first time.” She swallows, unshed tears filling her eyes. “Where were A-Xuan and I?”

His heart seizes and for one wild moment Wei Wuxian thinks he’s going to be ill as a wave of nausea washes over him. He has to drag a few deep breaths into his lungs before he can make a sound. “You were both killed,” he finally says in a voice barely loud enough to hear. “Jin Zixuan in Qionggqi Path the day of Jin Ling’s full month celebration and you, trying to protect me, on the battlefield that followed.”

Jin Zixuan pulls Jiang Yanli closer and Wei Wuxian can see their interaction that day shifting in his mind; can see the “what could have been” solidifying.

“When you grabbed me,” he says, his voice low, “you turned us both around like you were putting yourself between me and the archers.” His brow furrows and he shakes his head. “Everyone kept saying you’d gone crazy, but when you grabbed me you looked terrified. I didn’t... how did it happen?”

The question hangs there, giving Wei Wuxian the opportunity to fill in the next bit if he wants. But he doesn’t want to explain, so he just shakes his head. There’s no reason tragedies that didn’t occur should be spoken into existence now.

Jiang Cheng is as quick as lightning, crossing the distance between them in 2 long strides, his fist closing around Wei Wuxian’s outer robe, pulling him forward and off balance. “How did it happen?” he growls, giving Wei Wuxian a hard shake. “What did you do?”

“It didn’t happen this time.” Wei Wuxian pulls at Jiang Cheng’s wrist, trying to dislodge his hand. “I didn’t let it happen! That’s why I wanted everyone here. So I could tell you and maybe we could fix the rest of this.” His chest heaves as he pulls again and succeeds in freeing himself.

Lan Wangji's hand is a hot iron where it presses to his lower back to steady him when he stumbles back a step. Wei Wuxian hadn't even seen him move from his uncle's side.

Jiang Yanli catches Jiang Cheng’s wrist as he steps forward again. “A-Cheng, no.” Her words are soft but her tone leaves no room for argument. “Let him finish. To keep it from happening again, we need to know what to look for.”

Wei Wuxian's determination crumbles, she would have been, no she will be, an amazing mother to Jin Ling; he could never keep a secret from his sister. "I didn't mean for it to happen the first time," he whispers. He breathes through a stab of pain, "It was an accident, I promise. Jin Zixun attacked that day too, and when he crushed Jin Ling's gift all I saw was red. I hadn't realized I'd lost control until it was too late." His breath catches, he can't finish. So he says, "I promise, I deserved what I got last time, more even, but I know better now. Nothing like that will happen this time. I fixed what I could in the future so it would never happen again."

Wei Wuxian can feel Jiang Cheng's burning gaze but it's Lan Wangji who speaks first, interrupting the argument. "If you are from the future, how did you get here?"

Wei Wuxian glances between Jiang Cheng and Lan Wangji, the cold fire in Jiang Cheng's eyes causing him to flinch. "Years after everything settled down, I was leading our juniors on a night hunt in the northern forests of Gusu," he says quietly, turning to face Lan Zhan but not enough to turn completely away from Jiang Cheng. "The letter only warned of locals who would disappear after being attacked by a single beast. There was only one witness able to describe what happened during the attack and we had no reason to suspect the information was wrong. Our investigation supported the witness's report. It wasn't until we found the creature and were engaged in fighting it that the second one attempted to ambush Jin Ling and Ouyang Zizhen when they rotated to the back near me. That's how we learned there were actually two.

"As soon as I saw the beast I jumped between it and them, taking the blow instead." He shakes his head, his hand coming up to lay over his side. "I'd never seen a creature like it before. No one knew what happened to the person after they disappeared but that didn't matter. I had to protect my family."

There's a hitched sob and a quick glance reveals Jiang Yanli held tightly in her husband's arms, Wei Wuxian turns back to Lan Wangji so he doesn't have to see his sister cry, and continues, "The creature was tall and broad and looked as solid as a stone statue, but its appearance belied its agility and dexterity. One moment it was on the far side of the battlefield and in the blink of an eye it was upon us. Honestly I don't know how I made it in time." He pauses, pressing his palm harder into his side in an attempt to dull the flaring pain. "When its claws sank into my side it felt like the sky was crushing me. Everything went dark and between one second and the next I was moved from the forest outside Gusu to Qiongqi Path."

In the tense silence that falls over the room Wei Wuxian curls in on himself a little; the new position making it easier to breathe. "As soon as I figured out what happened, I didn't hesitate in doing everything in my power to fix my mistakes."

"How do we know this isn't some elaborate nightmare scenario created to scare us into compliance?" Nie Mingjue barks. "What kind of proof do you have that any of that is even real and not just a cover to get you and the rest of the Wen remnants out of trouble?"

Wei Wuxian straightens, breathing through the still growing pain. "What compliance? I've demanded nothing," he says. "No one asked for a safe place to house the survivors. You all

did that on your own after hearing their stories first hand. Is it too much to not be killed for crimes you didn't commit?"

Nie Huaisang leans heavily against his brother's side, his fingers locked in the heavy material to hide the tremors in his hand. "Wei-xiong, what can we do to stop that future from happening? Surely there's something we can do now that will stop it. If you're telling the truth then you're obviously capable of making changes and saving people. Right?" Seeing Nie Huaisang like this, undeniably devoted to his brother's survival, it's no wonder he did what he did in the future.

Crossing to Nie Mingjue, Wei Wuxian bows and says so only he can hear, "Chifeng-zun, if you would allow, I have knowledge that will eliminate the threat from Nie sabers to their wielders."

"You have no idea what you speak of," Nie Mingjue all but growls, the warning in his voice clear.

Without rising Wei Wuxian continues, "I swear on the lives of everyone I hold dear, in that life and this one, every word I have spoken is true."

Nie Mingjue steps away from Nie Huaisang and looks down at Wei Wuxian. "What good is your word, you just implied you had a hand in the killing of your sister and her husband?"

Wei Wuxian holds still, allowing the man to tower over him. "The death of Jin Zixuan in my first life was due to my loss of control. I take full responsibility for my actions at the time." He breathes deep, pushing the images of the battlefield from his mind. "Jiang Yanli was killed by a cultivator who thought they could stab me in the back while I knelt beside her on the ground. Her sacrifice was for nothing, in the end, and I'll never be able to repay her." The admission leaves Wei Wuxian feeling more hollow than before, with an icy chill crawling through his meridians. "My loyalty," he continues, swallowing thickly, "will always lie with the ones I call family and friends. If you wish to test my authenticity you can do so by whatever means you deem appropriate."

From the corner of his eye Wei Wuxian sees Lan Qiren look from Lan Wangji to Wei Wuxian, then to Nie Mingjue. "From a political standpoint, the current accusations from Qiongqi Path should be addressed first," he says. When Wei Wuxian turns his attention to Lan Qiren he holds the look, unflinching, before he continues. "Despite any evidence we have, it will be best to clear up all current grievances before moving forward with our questioning of the Jin Sect."

Wei Wuxian takes another deep breath as he turns to fully face Lan Qiren, shaking off someone's hand before it has a chance to get a good grip. "I suppose you expect me to beg forgiveness for protecting myself in the face of an unwarranted ambush?"

"The reports from multiple witnesses indicate Wen Qionglin attacked immediately after the contingent made their presence known to you," Lan Qiren counters.

Wei Wuxian knows Lan Qiren isn't being deliberately dense. He knows how intelligent the Grandmaster is, but right now Wei Wuxian can't find the patience to handle the political side

of things. He can hardly find time to process being ripped from his life, his future, and dropped into his now altered past. It's that pain and loss that guides his response.

"Jin Zixun made his contingent 'known to me' by ordering a wall of archers to rain arrows down on me with the intent to kill. And I fully understand that everyone's life would be worlds easier had he succeeded." His heart clenches at Jiang Yanli's sound of distress but he presses on. "However, since the events of my original history have not transpired, I will never apologize for fighting back." Silence fills the room when he pauses to catch his breath. Wei Wuxian points to his sister's husband, "The fact that Jin Zixuan is here at Lotus Pier by his own choice and actions is proof that the worst of my crimes are grossly exaggerated."

"A-Xian," Jiang Yanli whispers, and Wei Wuxian appreciates the way a few of the others look away from them. "You don't really believe we would be better off without you, do you?"

Wei Wuxian deflates, the pain taking his anger in an instant. He's reminded how long it's been since he felt her comfort so he opens his arms in an invitation she immediately takes. "I'm sorry Shijie," he whispers, closing his arms around her, "but it's true. I've done many things to be ashamed of since I was born but being able to stand here with both you and Jin Zixuan is my greatest accomplishment so far. I need you to understand how important your survival is to me."

Jiang Yanli only nods and holds him tighter.

"When the time comes I will stand in defense of Wei Wuxian," Jin Zixuan says, smoothly drawing everyone's attention to him. "I didn't see the beginning of their interaction; however what I did witness was far more hostility from Jin Zixun and his group than from Wei Wuxian. The fact that I was injured when they unleashed arrows into the valley is inexcusable and those responsible should have been held accountable that first night."

"Jin Zixuan," Lan Wangji interrupts, "you advised you traveled to the Burial Mounds and met with the refugees prior to gathering us to return when you brought Wei Ying to Lanling." Jin Zixuan nods. "Was it what you expected?"

"You all heard the same stories I did. Was it what you expected?" Jin Zixuan glances at Wei Wuxian before fixing his attention back on Lan Xichen, Nie Mingjue and Lan Qiren. "The destitution of the Jin encampments was reprehensible and those who were in control need to be held responsible. Furthermore, the Burial Mounds were only a safe haven because of the endless efforts Wei Wuxian put into cleansing the area and maintaining protective wards. It should have never been a place to live long term, especially for a child."

"A-Yuan?" Lan Xichen asks, appalled, his eyes jumping to Lan Wangji.

"Wen Yuan. I spoke of him after my return from Yiling," Lan Wangji answers, the stubborn set of his jaw unmistakable.

Lan Xichen's brows come together in consideration even as he shakes his head. "You said you met with Wei Ying and the child in the markets."

Lan Wangji gives his brother a look of disbelief and Wei Wuxian loves him more because of it. “Did you think Wei Ying befriended or abducted a random child in Yiling while he hid from hoards of cultivators hunting him and the Wen remnants?”

Lan Xichen says nothing immediately so Jin Zixuan presses on, “Not a single person there fought in Wen Ruohan's war. They all deserve better than to live out their lives on scraps and in constant fear of attack.”

“Wen Qionglin—” Nie Mingjue starts, but doesn’t get far.

Wei Wuxian cuts him off, tongue sharp as he says, “Wen Ning was a child who risked his life to carry Jiang Cheng, injured and unconscious, from Lotus Pier, then returned with the intent of retrieving the bodies of Jiang Fengmian and Yu-furen. The only thing he is guilty of is having the family name Wen.” Wei Wuxian shudders. “He sure as hell didn’t deserve to be tortured and murdered for the entertainment of some sick bastards from another gentry family.”

In the deafening silence that rings in the room, Wei Wuxian wraps his arms around his middle, a physical attempt at stopping the tremors shaking through his body as a blinding pain slices through him from the wound on his side. “If it’s a choice between them or me, I don’t care what you do with me.” His voice is barely more than a whisper. “But please don't turn them over to Jin Guangshan. They can't die like that again. They deserve to be somewhere safe, somewhere they can relax and not worry about being hunted for their name.” Overcome he sinks to the floor, startling a cry from Jiang Yanli as he hunches further in on himself. “They've always deserved to live.” His breath catches, exhaustion and agony biting at the edges of his vision. “When the cultivation world marched on our camp, they didn’t fight. They hid A-Yuan and accepted their fate. No one deserves to die like they did. They are caring people. Please, please don't let them be slaughtered again.”

Jiang Yanli falls to her knees next to him, her arms immediately wrapping around his shoulders to pull him close. “Wen-daifu,” she says, “is there anything you can do to help him?”

“If you will give us the room,” Wen Qing says as she kneels. “Your side is bleeding again. You've done all you can, it's time to rest.”

Wei Wuxian drags himself upright, breathing through the pain. “No, I still need to talk with Lan Zhan and Jiang Cheng.”

“They’ll be here later,” Wen Qing insists.

Wei Wuxian shakes his head. He has to do this now so neither thinks he’s hiding it from him again. He can’t live like that again. He won’t live like that again.

“A-Xuan,” Jiang Yanli says, leaning back but not breaking contact with Wei Wuxian. “Can you take the others to the pavilion behind our rooms? I’ll be out as soon as I can.” She pauses and when Jin Zixuan nods she turns to Jiang Cheng and Lan Wangji. “A-Cheng, Lan er-gongzi, if you would stay behind for a moment.”

Lan Wangji kneels on Wei Wuxian's other side and the smile Jiang Yanli gives brightens the room. Wei Wuxian closes his eyes. He silences the voice in his head who screams he doesn't deserve to see those smiles as he shifts to sit in lotus position so his hip will stop screaming at him for the extra pressure and also so he can eventually stand. He takes another breath, reminding himself that he can't hold grudges with his past self. If nothing else, he's earned her smiles by saving Jin Zixuan. The horrors from another life have no place in this life he's trying to build.

When Wei Wuxian finally tries to stand, Lan Wangji quickly presses his hand to his shoulder. "Let me up, Lan Zhan." Wei Wuxian reaches up, instinctively wanting to lace their fingers together. Instead he pats Lan Wangji's hand. "Wen-daifu needs to check my stitches."

"I can do that with you there," she interrupts, coming back with her tray of medical supplies.

Nodding, Wei Wuxian starts loosening his robes then hesitates. "Actually," he says, glancing at everyone. "I'd like to speak first." Wen Qing sighs but doesn't object.

Jiang Yanli, however, does. "A-Xian, whatever you need to say can wait." beside her Jiang Cheng watches him. "Your health comes first."

Wei Wuxian motions to his side. "This won't kill me. What I have to say is more important."

"Wei Ying?" Lan Wangji says and Wei Wuxian could cry at the way he can read the worry and confusion in just the way his name is spoken.

He smiles at Lan Wangji, glances at his siblings then looks down at his hands resting on his knees. This is his story to tell, as he should have done in his first life but couldn't. He regrets that decision even now as he's trying to fix it.

He opens his mouth but stops, reconsidering. "Lan Zhan, I would like to tell you both separately, can you fetch some water from the kitchens for tea?" Lan Wangji's brows furrow but he doesn't argue, just nods and steps out of the room, the door sliding shut behind him with a soft click. Wei Wuxian waits until his footsteps no longer echo on the pier outside then breathes deeply through his nose and starts.

"I don't have a core," he says simply and isn't surprised when Jiang Cheng explodes.

"The hell do you mean you don't have a core?!" He steps directly in front of Wei Wuxian, forcing him to look up to meet his eyes.

"I don't have one," he repeats. "I haven't had one since Yiling. Before I was thrown into the Burial Mounds the first time." Jiang Yanli gasps and the blood flushes from Jiang Cheng's face so fast Wei Wuxian almost tells him to sit.

"Wen Zhuliu was with Wen Chao when you were captured," Jiang Yanli says, leaning back a little as she presses her hands to her chest. At the same time Jiang Cheng takes a step away from Wei Wuxian.

Wei Wuxian shakes his head and tries to ignore the sting of rejection as he watches them pull away. His breath shakes as he pushes on. “He was, but he had nothing to do with this. This was a choice I made, on my own, and I would do it again if I had to.”

“A-Xian?” Jiang Yanli whispers. “What did you do?”

Wei Wuxian glances quickly between the two of them, unable to focus on either for more than a moment. His pulse throbs in his fingertips, and his nerves burn as though they’re on fire. He swallows the nausea crawling up his throat. “It was needed somewhere else, so I gave it away.”

“Who the hell,” Jiang Cheng growls, eyes blazing. “What do you mean gave it away?”

Wei Wuxian meets Jiang Cheng’s eyes, the silence growing teeth around them before the painful realization begins to seep in. Denial wars with desperation and Jiang Cheng grows paler than before, his eyes widening as the horror finally settles in.

It tears Wei Wuxian’s heart out to watch.

“No.” The word catches in his throat as his hand presses against his lower abdomen. For two agonizing breaths Jiang Cheng does nothing, then he lunges forward and grabs Wei Wuxian by the collar, hauling him to his feet. “You bastard!” he roars.

Jiang Cheng shakes Wei Wuxian once, twice, then again. He’s yelling but the physical pain is clouding Wei Wuxian’s senses, so his focus drifts to the heat and sting of Zidian as it sparks, the energy biting where it touches. Wei Wuxian closes his hand around Jiang Cheng’s wrist and the surge of raw power from the weapon burns across his skin, racing up his arm to mix with the other pain coursing through his body; he loses seconds or minutes, insensate.

Lan Wangji appears then, coming back into the room at just the right—or wrong—time, and tries to force his way between them. His arm is like a steel bar stretched across Wei Wuxian’s chest but Jiang Cheng’s grip doesn’t budge. With a curse Jiang Cheng plants his free hand flat against Lan Wangji’s solar plexus and sends a power surge to shove him away.

Using the distraction, Wen Qing tries to slip around Jiang Cheng but he catches her movement and his head snaps in her direction, his expression ugly.

Wei Wuxian catches Jiang Cheng’s fist in his free hand, the two of them grappling together. Jiang Cheng shifts, and from long experience Wei Wuxian sees the shove coming. He tries to dislodge himself before his brother can force him back toward Wen Qing but at the last moment Jiang Cheng shifts again. Instead of pushing Wei Wuxian directly at the doctor, he redirects to cast him to the side. From the corner of his eye, Wei Wuxian sees their sister reaching for Jiang Cheng. Hoping his momentum is enough to carry him away from her, Wei Wuxian plants his feet and twists.

He feels each stitch tear free; his blood is warm as it soaks his robe.

In the end, his efforts are of no use. The collision is inevitable.

As soon as Jiang Cheng releases him, Wei Wuxian crashes into Jiang Yanli. His only thought is to protect her at all cost, so he wraps his arms around her and turns, again, so she will be cushioned from the fall.

He hears her exclamation, hears Jiang Cheng's cry of 'Jiejie!' and Lan Wangji's call of 'Wei Ying!' and can do nothing except close his eyes and accept the fall.

Wei Wuxian hits the edge of the step at the transition between rooms. He's a little off centered and with his arms around his sister his injured side is exposed and takes the full impact. He bites his tongue to stop a grunt of pain from escaping and tastes blood when he gasps, trying to drag air back into his lungs. A broken "Jiejie?" falls from his lips as soon as he has breath to ask. A moment later Wei Wuxian swallows a cry as he's jostled when she's pulled from his arms.

Jiang Cheng turns his back to Wei Wuxian as he bundles her against his chest and tucks her head under his chin; his arms circle her like a shield. He holds her tight as he apologizes, again and again, for putting her in harm's way.

"Wei Wuxian?" Wen Qing asks as she kneels next to him a breath later. "Hanguan-jun, help me get him up."

"I'm fine," Wei Wuxian says, gritting through the pain to stand on his own.

To his dismay, Lan Wangji steps back. In an effort to stop his retreat, Wei Wuxian grabs for his sleeve, letting it slip through his fingers when Lan Wangji freezes. His eyes never leave his face, so Wei Wuxian can see the pain and confusion in his golden eyes. Wei Wuxian wants to tell him it'll be ok. Wants to say he loves him. He misses him. That he wants to be held close to him. But he can't so the words stick painfully in his throat.

"A-Cheng, please," Wei Wuxian hears Jiang Yanli say. "I'm fine, A-Xian needs us."

"He has his doctor," Jiang Cheng spits, guiding his sister across the room and over the threshold. "Let him live with the choices he made."

As Wen Qing guides Wei Wuxian to his bed, he watches Lan Wangji track the Jiang siblings's departure. Despite his breaking heart he says, "It's okay, Lan Zhan. You can leave too if you want."

Lan Wangji's attention is instantly on Wei Wuxian, so neither can hide their emotions. Without a word Lan Wangji crosses to Wei Wuxian's bed, setting the qiankun pouch from his sleeve on the edge of the bed beside him. Wei Wuxian tracks his movements and feels his heart break as Lan Wangji bows.

Before the tears have a chance to fall from Wei Wuxian's eyes, Lan Wangji has turned and disappeared from the room.

Wei Wuxian ignores the pain—old and new—and lets Wen Qing do whatever she must. She's is quiet while she works to reclose the wound, only speaking as she finishes.

“I’ll make you something to help you sleep.”

Wei Wuxian shuffles around until he’s as comfortable as he can make himself. “I don’t need it.”

Wen Qing sighs but doesn’t argue. “I’ll leave something for the pain, in case you want it later.”

Wei Wuxian nods as he turns his face away from her. Once she’s gone, with only the lapping of water to listen to, Wei Wuxian allows himself to cry. And when the energy drains from his limbs and he can’t find the willpower to keep his eyes open, he lets exhaustion drag him into the darkness of a fitful sleep.

Chapter End Notes

I absolutely thrive on kudos and comments (emojis are a valid form of communication!!)

you can find me on [tumblr](#) and [twitter](#)

I'm most active here and in a few servers on discord, like [Haven](#), which is a wonderful writing focused server, and [Danmei Destination](#), which is all things, well, Danmei lol

Summons

Chapter Notes

This piece is complete and will update Mondays and Thursdays

Big thanks to everyone who put up with me while I wrote this, your encouragement and assistance along the way mean the world to me. I couldn't have done it without you. And all the love in the world to [MsJulia](#) for making sure my love hate relationship with commas doesn't embarrass me and helped tweak a few areas to perfection.

Any errors are mine alone and are fixable, immediately, if pointed out!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It's just before sunrise when Wei Wuxian wakes, violently, from a nightmare. His side is on fire and the hollow feeling is worse than the day before. While he lies awake, he compares this world to the one he remembers and discovers his memories are far too distorted by pain and grief in both to draw a clear conclusion. None of this makes him feel any better.

"I think I'm dying," he tells Wen Qing when she comes to check on him while the sun is still barely above the horizon. He hasn't moved from bed; the pain, he tells her, is enough to stop even him. He's mostly lying to himself. They both know he doesn't want to face the world, but that's an issue for later.

"Do you plan to speak to Jiang-zongzhu or Hanguang-jun today?"

Or not...

"It will depend on whether they come to visit first. I've been ordered to bed-rest, as you know."

Wen Qing gives him a withering look. "You were close to them both, in the future? Did they know the truth?"

He nods and when she doesn't answer he tells her the story, as he was told by Wen Ning. "Jiang Cheng took it with all the grace of an angry wet tiger and I'm positive Lan Zhan blamed himself for not seeing the truth from the beginning despite the way I did everything in my power to hide it from everyone."

Wen Qing hums. "They'll come around. Until then, describe what you're feeling so we can decide if you're cursed or if this is just your body trying to readjust to life without resentful energy."

It's almost lunch when Wen Qing stops prodding, working to clean an area of the wound from the beast that is more inflamed than the rest. The only warning Wei Wuxian gets is a firm 'sit still' before she digs something out.

As soon as the debris is fully extracted, Wei Wuxian's pain intensifies, his earlier off handed comment coming back to bite him in the ass.

Inspecting the gray shard, she asks, "Could this be from the creature?"

Breathing through the still intensifying pain, Wei Wuxian takes it from her. "It's the same color, it could be the tip of a claw," he pauses, holding his breath for a moment, "Maybe it broke off when it hit my rib."

She assesses him for a moment, always observant, "Any other changes besides the increase in pain? Focus on everything for a minute and tell me if anything changed."

Memories from their time in the Burial Mounds brings a fondness that grows in his chest at how easily she reads patients. He clenches his jaw as a wave of pain washes over him. "It hurts without moving. Beyond the pain, I feel tired, physically; like I've been pushing myself and I just need to sit down and rest."

Wen Qing nods as she starts tidying up. "Then you rest while I take this. I'll be back before dinner to check on you."

Wei Wuxian doesn't argue but perks up when Jiang Yanli slips the door open, a tray of food balanced on her arm. "I brought enough for three," she says when Wen Qing rises.

"Thank you," Wen Qing replies with a bow, "but I must speak with the healers and continue my research."

Jiang Yanli sets the tray down, a soft smile lighting her face. "We can never repay you for keeping such a good eye on A-Xian. If there's anything you need, please let me know."

Wei Wuxian watches their interaction and wonders what life will be like with both of them healthy and alive. His eyes sting at the thought so he distracts himself by setting out the dishes.

"I would have done that," Jiang Yanli says, taking a bowl from Wei Wuxian's hand and placing it on the table. "How are you feeling this morning?"

The sadness in his sister's eyes cools whatever warmth was spreading through his chest. "I'll be fine, you know I'm resilient."

Jiang Yanli hums. "I'm not asking about your ability to adapt to a situation. I'm asking how you are, A-Xian."

Wei Wuxian bites his cheek as he turns his face away, unable to look at her for a moment. When he finally collects himself enough to speak he asks, "You believe me, don't you? That I'm from the future."

To her credit she doesn't answer right away, thinking for a moment instead. "The story you told is hard to accept. No mother or father wants to hear their child grew up without them, and no one wants to be told their brother died and they were forced to endure without his love and support." She pauses and Wei Wuxian can't help but hold his breath. "You've always had an active imagination and sharp wit but you have never spun tales or tried to deceive anyone like this before. On the surface you look just like my didi, but underneath... underneath there's a whole other life that didn't exist the last time we spoke." She reaches across to brush a length of hair behind his ear.

"Every word was true," Wei Wuxian whispers, eyes closed to keep the tears locked inside. "I would never lie to you Jiejie. No matter the lifetime." When she doesn't speak he adds, "I know everyone is here, but I'm terrified of messing up and ruining it before there's even a chance... of it all going away. I only want to make things right."

There's a rustle of clothes followed by her arms wrapping around him like they did when he was a child. "You must miss them so much." Her words are soft and all Wei Wuxian can do is bury his face in her shoulder and nod.

Jiang Cheng finds them a little while later, pressed close while Jiang Yanli tells Wei Wuxian about her time in Koi Tower. "I told Jin Zixuan I'd bring you back. It's almost time for A-Ling's feeding," he announces as he slides the door open.

Jiang Yanli's smile is indulgent. "A-Ling is with his Naima. He won't miss me if I miss a single meal."

Jiang Cheng snaps the door closed. "There's only one baby in Lotus Pier you should be coddling and it's not him."

Wei Wuxian scoots back, putting space between himself and both his siblings. "I'll leave if you don't want me here. I know none of this is ideal and the last thing I want is to bring more trouble to Yunmeng. The only thing I ask is that you give me enough time to find a safe place for the survivors before turning them out as well."

Jiang Cheng bristles. "If I wanted you out I would have thrown you out already," he barks as he crosses the room in three long strides. "Why is running away your answer for everything?" He looms over Wei Wuxian and the image of another time, before he left, flashes in his mind. Wei Wuxian flinches despite his best efforts and hates watching his brother's face crumple.

Wei Wuxian stands, slowly, and doesn't wince when the pain cuts across from his side and shoulder. "I don't want to run away. If I survive whatever Jin Guangshan has planned and I can't find a way home, I would like to stay here and be a valuable asset to the Jiang Sect."

The muscle in Jiang Cheng's jaw ticks. "You think you can just come back after what you put this sect through?" If the fire in his eyes could kill it would.

Wei Wuxian holds his gaze for a moment then bows, it's a little shaky, pulling at his side, but perfectly executed otherwise; he holds it through his sister's gasp.

“Stop that,” Jiang Cheng snaps. “Sit down, there are things that need to be discussed.”

Wei Wuxian rises from the bow then settles at the table again. “I’m okay, Shijie,” he says, gently grasping her hand before letting it go.

“A-Xuan has been in contact with cultivators he trusts and are willing to follow his command,” Jiang Yanli says, motioning Jiang Cheng down when he hesitated. “They were the cultivators spotted yesterday. They arrived with news from Lanling.”

Wei Wuxian nods. “Let me guess, Sect Leader Jin is calling for everyone to sign a pact renouncing my existence and calling for my immediate surrender or death, whichever is most convenient.”

She nods. “A conference has been planned for two days’ time. Is this the battlefield you spoke of?” Her concern is clearly written on her face.

Wei Wuxian nods, swallowing the painful lump in his throat so he can speak. “Please stay here, no matter what happens don’t go. Your family needs you.” He quickly glances at Jiang Cheng. “They can’t lose you.”

Jiang Yanli clearly wants to argue but after a moment nods.

The rest of lunch passes in a blur of information, leaving Wei Wuxian’s head pounding by the time Yanli packs up the tray and lets Jiang Cheng usher her out of the room. He spends the afternoon thinking about everything that has changed so far and what the implications of Jin Guangshan’s pact means for everyone he holds dear. It’s a death sentence to turn himself in and he knows if he goes as anything except a prisoner the Jiang sect will be prosecuted the same as him. He dozes off with dark thoughts still heavy on his mind.

A single knock on the door startles him awake. The encroaching darkness means it’s just before dinner so he calls out for whoever it is to enter after ducking behind the privacy screen to straighten up. The ‘last meal’ joke he was planning dies on his tongue when he sees Lan Qiren waiting patiently just inside the open door.

“Lan-xiansheng. This humble one is thankful for your visit.” Wei Wuxian covers his shock with as deep of a bow as he can manage.

There’s a moment of silence, then, “Sit down, Wei Wuxian. Before you hurt yourself more.”

Wei Wuxian sits. He knows Lan Qiren well enough now to know his own ramblings, as he is wont to do in stressful situations, only aid in agitation and now is neither the time nor the place for arguments that can so easily be avoided. Instead he offers tea, motioning to a tea set on the far side of the room, and is left scrambling to his feet again when Lan Qiren turns as if to retrieve the necessary items. For his troubles he pulls a stitch in his side and gets told off by his once future husband’s uncle. His heart hurts, and the gnawing, empty pit where his core once filled him with life has started to seep a chill into his bones. He shivers as a wave of exhaustion washes over him. It radiates from his side and he decides if it is a curse, it’s

obviously emotionally driven and at the rate it's spreading he'll be consumed before Jin Guangshan has a chance to convince anyone else to raise a sword against him.

The tea steeps between them and Wei Wuxian smiles. "Would you believe me if I told you one day we would both look forward to tea together?"

Lan Qiren quirks an eyebrow in disbelief and Wei Wuxian smiles brighter.

Wei Wuxian pauses, throat suddenly tight. "Sometimes we spend all afternoon discussing anything that strikes our fancy. It's nice... or, I suppose, it will be nice. Lan Zhan, Sizhui, and Zewu-jun would join us sometimes just to hear our conversations." Another wave of pain washes over him and he tries to force his emotions down to no avail. He smiles, trying to distract. "I'm really not a wretched person. I've made mistakes in my life but what everyone wants to condemn me for is the only thing that kept me alive this long. It wasn't a choice, it was a necessity." They sit in silence for a minute and Wei Wuxian pretends it's not because he can't catch his breath because of the pain.

Finally Lan Qiren clears his throat. "I have spoken with Xichen and we both have concerns over statements you've made regarding Wangji and the horrendous punishment you claimed to have witnessed." Lan Qiren pauses, clearly giving Wei Wuxian a chance to amend his earlier statements. When he doesn't, Lan Qiren continues, "And now Wangji is deeply troubled and refuses to explain why." The clink of ceramic on wood echoes in the room. "I would like a clear explanation for both."

Unconsciously, Wei Wuxian brings his hand to his side, pressing against the next blossom of pain. He isn't surprised by Lan Qiren's request, in truth he would be more concerned if he hadn't been confronted. With a deep breath he prepares himself for whatever outcome may be waiting for him and asks, "Which would you like to hear first?"

"Why would Wangji be punished in such a way?"

Wei Wuxian braces for the curse—because that's what this is—body tense as if ready for battle. This has never been a fond bit of knowledge and it was only after many years of effort that he was able to rein in his emotions and opinions on the subject.

"I only know what I was told by Zewu-jun after I was brought back the first time," Wei Wuxian begins, fully accepting how preposterous his explanation already sounds. "I waged war on everyone after Shijie—after Jiang Yanli was murdered during the first Pact Conference Jin Guangshan called for. By the end of it, my anger and the resentful energy raging around fully consumed me to the point of collapse... Lan Zhan saw me fall and, in an effort to save me, flew us to a cave outside of Yiling.

"As soon as he was able, Zewu-jun gathered you and thirty-three elders to find him. When we were discovered, Lan Zhan stood against the elders' orders, injuring them in the process. He was taken back to Gusu where it was decided he would receive a strike for each elder injured."

For a moment they both just breathe. Wei Wuxian takes comfort from the horror on Lan Qiren's face, hoping this knowledge will allow him to stop the atrocity from happening if

there ever comes a time. As he breathes in to speak again he's overcome by a coughing fit. The blood isn't a surprise to him but Lan Qiren is clearly taken aback if the way he says Wei Wuxian's name is anything to go by.

Wei Wuxian waves him off. "It's no matter, I'm fairly certain the wound that sent me here also possesses a curse. It appears to be connected to my emotions—I'm pretty sure it's killing me." He drags in a wheezing breath and takes a sip of tea to try to soothe his throat. "It's not why Lan Zhan is upset."

"Has Wen Qing done nothing about this?" The concern, laced in such intensity, catches Wei Wuxian solidly in the heart, reminding him of a time after he and Lan Zhan were first married. He had been injured on a night hunt and was still learning how to read Lan Qiren, so the gruff reception had been hard to take.

"We're researching the beast," he answers, trying to ignore the burning clench of his abdomen. "This part intensified after we pulled what looked like the tip of its claw from my side."

Lan Qiren leans forward, hand slapping against the table. "Is your core so damaged it can no longer help you fight off the basic effects of a curse?"

Wei Wuxian's laugh echoes in the room and he immediately covers it with apologies. "I'm sorry," he hisses, arms wrapped tightly around his midsection. "I didn't mean to laugh. I didn't. It's been so long. I forgot how you were before you knew."

Lan Qiren eyes him for a moment. "Before I knew what?"

Wei Wuxian wants to close his eyes and pretend he's back in his time, having a normal conversation and not, he's pretty sure, actively dying. He says as much as he forces his body to remain upright in as dignifying a pose as he can assume. "This is why Lan Zhan is upset, partially anyway, I'm pretty sure he knows the whole story now." He drags in a breath and unsuccessfully tries to force his hands to unclench from the material above his knees before continuing softly, "If he doesn't it'll be something else for him to worry about, or not, maybe. I guess it depends on if he loves me as deeply as he says he did during this time, the first time... not that you want to hear any of that. Ignore me, his affections or lack thereof is for me to worry about." He tries to laugh but it's a hollow sound.

"Wei Wuxian."

Wei Wuxian unlatches a hand to wave off the reprimand "Sorry, sorry. I'm rambling."

A coughing fit stalls the conversation further and Wei Wuxian's patience with himself starts to run thin by the time he catches his breath. With no preamble he says, "Lan Zhan is upset because he learned I gave my core away."

The old Wei Wuxian would have taken pleasure in seeing Lan Qiren recoil the way he does, his disbelief warring with confusion and maybe a touch of pity. But sitting here with his lived experience from the future all Wei Wuxian feels is a great loss. It hurts on a fundamental

level knowing that the man sitting across from him doesn't know him well enough to see him as anything but a menace and a lost cause.

For one wild moment Wei Wuxian wonders if Lan Wangji not being interested in him this time would be a blessing, since as long as Wei Wuxian is breathing he'll never allow Mo Xuanyu to sacrifice himself again, and as such will never be able to cultivate to longevity like they had been. He banishes the thought from his mind and looks away, no longer wanting to see the effect his words have.

"It was my choice. I had it transplanted where it was needed. I don't regret my actions and if I faced the same events I would do it again."

Near the door someone clears their throat and Wei Wuxian's heart drops. He doesn't acknowledge the newcomer. He can't. Instead he curses under his breath.

"Shufu," Lan Wangji's voice is controlled, chillier than Wei Wuxian has heard in two life times, or he supposes three, now. "Xiongzhang wished for me to inform you that we are heading for dinner."

Wei Wuxian swallows the hurt and ache in his heart and stands as gracefully as he can. From a bow he says, "I shouldn't hold either of you up, I've heard Jiang Yanli has been personally preparing the dishes for the Lan Sect and such an honor shouldn't be missed on my account."

When he straightens, Lan Qiren is assessing him with a critical eye.

"Wangji, I will have your meal sent here." It's obviously an order and all they can do is watch as Lan Qiren walks out, leaving Lan Wangji in the doorway.

They watch each other for a moment and Wei Wuxian wants nothing more than the freedom to cross the room and wrap Lan Zhan in his arms and never let him go, but he can't, that privilege isn't his anymore... may never be his again. Instead he fights back the tears that burn his eyes and motions to the table as he picks up the tray so he can refresh the water and tea supply.

"I can offer tea and a story like old times if you wish or we can pass the time asking and answering questions."

The relief of Lan Zhan not walking away shouldn't take his breath like it does but Wei Wuxian can't deny the emotion, or the pain it inflicts, so he takes an extra moment to compose himself before returning. He manages to sit the tray on the table gently but isn't nearly as successful himself, sitting heavily on the cushion when his knee gives out.

He runs his thumbs over the aching joint. "I beg your forgiveness for my ungracefulness, I seem to be falling apart as of late."

"You should be resting instead of hosting visitors," the reply is sharp and just shy of judgmental, and entirely in line with the younger Lan Wangji Wei Wuxian remembers.

Wei Wuxian shrugs as he activates a warming talisman for the teapot. “I’ve been given an opportunity and refuse to squander it. Thank you for taking care of my qiankun pouch. You never opened it to see what was in there did you?”

Lan Wangji shakes his head. “I was only instructed to protect it and ensure it did not end up in the wrong hands. I assumed Jin Zixuan meant Jin Guangshan.”

“Astute as always, Lan Zhan.” Wei Wuxian’s adoration weighs heavy on his tongue. He takes a second to look away, rubbing his chest in hopes of lessening the growing pain before looking back up. “I should apologize, I’ve wanted to talk to you since all this started and every chance I’ve had has come to ruin.”

Lan Wangji hums, but still doesn’t sit. “There are more important people to discuss things with.”

At Lan Wangji’s flat tone, Wei Wuxian jerks forward, his hand slapping the surface of the table—his shoulder and side protests the quick movement but he couldn’t care less. “No. Lan Zhan. There is nothing more important to me than you or our conversations.”

Lan Wangji remains motionless as he watches him. It hurts in a way the reverberating wave of pain that washes over him doesn’t. Wei Wuxian thinks he’s going to be sick.

“Are you really from the future?” Lan Wangji pauses just like Lan Qiren and Wei Wuxian would feel fond of the similarity under different circumstances.

“My mind and spirit, yes.”

“And the Wei Ying from now?”

Wei Wuxian casts his eyes to the table as he considers his body and mind. He takes a deep breath and looks into Lan Wangji’s eyes. “All the scars and marks this body carries are identical to the ones I carried in my youth and the memories are definitely sharper than they were in the future... I was barely alive after Qiongqi and the pact conference. Everything else fell apart shortly after.”

The play of emotions across Lan Wangji’s face is heartbreaking.

When he can focus on his own words again Wei Wuxian says, “The way I died doesn’t matter.” His voice drops to a whisper, throat too tight to continue at a regular volume. “You asked, once, in the future, if I remembered. Against my better judgment I told the truth. It was the second time I watched you cry.”

Lan Wangji schools his features, face carefully blank, and squares his shoulders. “I should allow you to rest. It is clear you are still in pain.”

Wei Wuxian scrambles to his feet, hissing as his side throbs. “Wait. Wait. I want you to have this. It’s not much, but inside is everything of value I own.” Wei Wuxian ignores the swelling waves of pain and quickly retrieves the qiankun pouch from his robes. As he holds it out

toward Lan Wangji his hand shakes, the muscles in his arm twitching as though exhausted from battle.

Lan Wangji turns to face Wei Wuxian, his eyes not once glancing at the pouch. “Why?”

Wei Wuxian takes another deep breath to steady his voice. “Because if anything happens, I know you will do the right thing. I trust you more than anyone else in the entirety of the world. Myself included, sometimes.” He looks down, watching as his fingers tighten around the bag.

They stand for a moment more before Lan Wangji speaks. “The seal is in here?”

“Among other things, yes.”

Lan Wangji inspects the simple pouch as he takes it. “Does your cultivation depend on the seal’s existence?” he asks, his thumb rubbing over the rough material.

More tears prick Wei Wuxian’s eyes. If he was home, he would kiss him for his inquisitiveness, but he isn’t so he answers instead. “It does not. The seal made controlling large groups of corpses easier during the war. I didn’t fully understand what I was doing at the time and any advantage was important.”

“But now you do know what you’re doing.” There is frost in his words when he speaks.

Wei Wuxian nods. “I do. Through learning how limitless the power can be if you are willing to give everything to it I now know my limits and what it would take to ever push me past them again. That didn’t really matter in the future though, I didn’t have to rely on resentful energy for too long after I was brought back.”

Lan Wangji’s hand tightens around the pouch, his anger easy to read even before he speaks. “If you gave it up in the future, why can’t you give it up now?”

“I didn’t give it up. I just didn’t have to rely on it to survive.” Wei Wuxian motions around himself. “But that’s what I was doing here, what I am doing now. Things are different... in the future I’m surrounded by people who love and support me. I didn’t have that before I died.

“On that mountain it was us against the world. My family couldn’t, or wouldn’t, stand by me, and you never visited again after our lunch in Yiling.”

Lan Wangji recoils and Wei Wuxian snaps his mouth shut so quickly his teeth click painfully. He breaths for a moment as pain licks across his chest like Zidian.

When Lan Wangji speaks his voice is barely more than a whisper, “Am I there, in the future?”

Wei Wuxian nods.

“And that made you happy?”

“I have known no greater happiness,” Wei Wuxian confesses as another wave of pain sends him into a coughing fit.

Gasping for air Wei Wuxian squeezes his eyes shut, the pain thundering through his head drowns out all other sounds beyond the grinding of his teeth and the rattle of air in his lungs. From somewhere beyond the blinding haze Wei Wuxian hears his name, desperate and terrified, and a moment later his fingers are being pried from the material above his heart as Lan Wangji’s unmistakable power courses into his meridians through the palm pressed over the Wen brand.

“Deep breath, Wei Ying. Follow me.” Lan Wangji says, guiding them both to the ground.

Wei Wuxian’s captured hand is pressed against a firm surface and belatedly he realizes it is Lan Wangji’s chest, and because Wei Wuxian’s luck is either crap or is finally working in his favor, Wen Qing arrives with the Jiang disciple delivering their dinner. As if from underwater Wei Wuxian hears Wen Qing questioning Lan Wangji; who answers even as his power courses through Wei Wuxian’s meridians.

Wei Wuxian groans as the calming warmth begins to burn like ice in his veins. With great reluctance, Wei Wuxian pulls his hand free. “Lan Zhan. Stop.” His lungs burn, and each breath brings more fire. “Please.”

Lan Wangji hesitates but when Wen Qing kneels he removes his palm, breaking the flow of qi. “We were talking. I could tell he wasn’t well but I didn’t stop him.”

“Lan Zhan, no,” Wei Wuxian rasps as Wen Qing scoffs.

“He’s stubborn, he wouldn’t have listened to you.” She pauses long enough to grab something from her kit before taking Wei Wuxian’s wrist in her hand. “Tell me what you’re feeling, Wei Wuxian, this is important.”

Wei Wuxian shakes his head. He can’t admit to the pain with Lan Wangji there. He’ll blame himself.

“Wei Ying, we must know what’s wrong,” Lan Wangji says, firm. Long familiarity allows Wei Wuxian to hear the hidden terror nonetheless.

Wei Wuxian squeezes his eyes shut so he won’t see Lan Wangji’s reaction as he explains the radiating pain that’s been growing since Lan Qiren arrived and the moment of peace before the warmth grew to a raging fire in his meridians when Lan Wangji shared his spiritual energy. He explains the intense draining sensation as soon as Lan Wangji let go, and how what he originally thought was hollowness actually has a weight to it.

“I’m going to try something,” she says, then lets her power flow through him.

Because Wei Wuxian is watching her face, hoping for any sign, he sees the moment she hooks her qi into the abyss and is hit with a sharp backlash. Her eyes snap open and they look at each other for a moment.

“Wen-daifu?” Lan Wangji asks, voice no more than a whisper.

She shakes her head. “I think that's enough for tonight. He needs rest.”

Lan Wangji looks between the two of them then bows, leaving with a simple goodbye. The commotion having wiped away any chance of continuing their previous conversation now.

Nightmares plague Wei Wuxian's dreams, keeping him awake most of the night. When Wen Qing arrives in the morning he's irritated and exhausted. “Can you make the sleeping draught so I can get some rest today and tonight?”

“I will, but first we need to discuss the implications of the curse taking root in your meridians.”

“There's nothing to discuss. After the pact conference we'll find a way to flush it out. Maybe forcing a strong surge of qi through my meridians will burn it at the source.”

Wen Qing immediately bristles, “Absolutely not. That could cause irreparable damage.”

Wei Wuxian laughs. “Irreparable damage? It's not like I'm using it anyway! If this saves my life I don't see what the problem is.” He presses his palm to his lower abdomen. “It's not like I've got any other prospects.”

“That's not the point and you know it.”

“Besides,” he says, “Jiang Cheng's meridians were scorched by Wen Zhuliu and they're fine now, at worst I'll be like him before the transplant.”

The book she's holding thumps loudly on the table. “We'll figure something else out. Until then we research,” she snaps.

By lunch they've found nothing helpful and the curse has decided to lock on to Wei Wuxian's frustration as fuel. Knowing he's reached his limits, Wen Qing mixes a pot of medicine while he eats.

“Drink half of this now and if you're still in pain when you wake up later you can take the rest. This should allow you to sleep through the night.”

“Thank you, Qing-jie.” Wei Wuxian is pouring his first half before she's closed the door behind her.

Wei Wuxian wakes to gentle fingers brushing through his hair. The sensation brings a smile to his face until the curse lashes across his heart. When he hears his sister gasp his name in

fear, the pain intensifies tenfold. He loves her, but for a moment he'd thought he was back home—he misses his husband so much.

He's exhausted again by the time his emotions are under control enough to break the loop of the curse and when his doors slide open and the sect leaders and heirs start filing into his rooms, he learns, to his horror, he hasn't even slept through the night.

"A bit of warning would be nice," he hisses at Jiang Cheng while the group settles.

"And risk you conveniently not being here? Absolutely not."

Jiang Yanli looks between the two for a moment then takes Wei Wuxian's hand in hers. "This is important. We have to be prepared for the morning."

Wei Wuxian shifts around until he's upright, pain swallowed for a moment. "Where is the conference being held, Lanling?"

Jin Zixuan wraps his arm around Jiang Yanli's shoulder and nods. "He expects you to be in attendance so you can be held accountable for a list of crimes."

Wei Wuxian lays back down, too tired to be bothered with decorum. "I'm obviously going, but I would like to know for a fact I'm not being led to slaughter."

Lan Qiren tsks as he lowers himself to a cushion, followed by the others. "You've always been so dramatic."

"Jin Zixuan already said he would do what he could to help," Nie Huaisang says from behind his fan. "We haven't had a chance to really discuss the things you spoke of, so letting something happen to you would go against the greater good of society."

"And when we've corrected as many mistakes as we can? Then what?" Wei Wuxian asks, realizing the chances of society not turning on him again are slim now that he can't return to the sword path and if word of his involvement in any political upheavals gets out that number drops to near zero. If he's lucky they will only cast him out. Maybe he'll finally get to be a farmer like he's always wanted.

"Then we can work on making the world a better place, especially for the future generations." Jiang Yanli reaches out to squeeze his hand.

Wei Wuxian takes a moment to look around at all the sect leaders watching him. He has the opportunity to do so much good if he can just survive this one obstacle.

He struggles back up. "Fine, let's figure out a plan that doesn't end with me in a dungeon or worse."

When morning finally comes, Wei Wuxian is waiting in the courtyard, rocking a still-sleeping A-Yuan. It's mostly dark, the sun not quite high enough to illuminate the sky. The watercolor bleed of the sunrise over the horizon is beautiful and makes Wei Wuxian's heart ache. The

curse, which began gnawing away again in an all over pain as soon as the impromptu meeting began yesterday, did not recede after everyone had cleared out and left Wei Wuxian to toss and turn until his precious son had slipped into his rooms, snuggling in close and promptly falling asleep clutching Wei Wuxian's arm.

He can't help but smile when Jiang Yanli, the absolute best sister that she is, approaches with a small bowl of soup. Wei Wuxian shifts A-Yuan, exposing his head and shoulder from under the blanket he has wrapped around them both and relishes in the smile it draws from his sister.

She gives him a critical once over and sighs. "I remembered how you would come out to wait for everyone when you were little so I thought I'd try here first... please eat something before you leave. I'm already so worried about you as it is." Her eyes are focused on A-Yuan, watching the small changes in his expression as she smooths down his unruly hair. Wei Wuxian shifts his bundle so he can take the bowl. Who is he to deny his sister such a simple request?

They sit in peaceful silence until the bowl is empty and A-Yuan begins to stir. When they see Granny on one of the walkways obviously looking for her wayward charge, Wei Wuxian kisses his tiny forehead, right where the Lan ribbon will hopefully lay again. It's difficult to let him go but they're out of time and they all know it'll be best if the toddler is elsewhere while everyone gathers.

"It'll be ok, A-Yuan. Be good for Granny and I'll see if Rich-gege can take you to visit his home after he gets back."

A-Yuan makes a face. "But I want to stay with you," he mumbles sleepily.

Jiang Yanli promises, lifting A-Yuan onto her hip. "We'll come back before Xian-gege leaves, but right now we have to get dressed for the day." Wei Wuxian can't resist kissing A-Yuan's forehead one last time before they leave.

While he waits he considers the group chosen the night before. The Sect leaders were a given, as well as Lan Qiren, and Lan Wangji. He hadn't been surprised when Jiang Yanli insisted Wen Qing be included, or when Nie Huaisang had volunteered to remain behind. The retinue was harder, each cultivator being chosen with care to ensure no one harbored malicious intent toward Wei Wuxian. It had been a long night, but in the end they settled on a group of twenty four.

"I can't ride with you," Wei Wuxian says when approached by Jiang Cheng half a shichen later. He doesn't want to explain the absolute terror he felt riding with Jin Zixuan and how he knows it'll be worlds worse with Jiang Cheng.

"Don't be stubborn." He's furious and Wei Wuxian is not the only one who can tell. "How else are you going to get there? Walk?"

Wei Wuxian contemplates telling him about his teleportation talisman but decides doing so would also require him thoroughly explaining how it works and right now is definitely not the time or place.

Lan Wangji clears his throat, interrupting the one sided argument. “He can ride with me if he wishes.”

Something shifts across Jiang Cheng’s face but before he can speak Wei Wuxian accepts the offer. “Thank you, Lan Zhan, but only if you’re sure.”

He could use any excuse imaginable but the truth is, no matter which lifetime, he trusts Lan Wangji more than anyone else with his life, even himself. And if he’s being completely honest, he absolutely misses being near him and as long as this Lan Wangji doesn’t toss him from Bichen along the way it’ll be fine.

Jiang Cheng, if possible, grows angrier.

When Jiang Yanli returns with Jin Zixuan and the other Jin cultivators two things occur to Wei Wuxian. First, Luo Qingyang is clearly in charge of the group and second, in all the time he’s been back he hasn’t held Jin Ling. He laughs once, a humorless thing full of heartache and regret, as he watches his sister cross to him with Jin Ling cradled in one arm and A-Yuan grasping her free hand.

“Oh, A-Xian,” She whispers, maneuvering her tiny charges so she can wipe a tear from his cheek, “I thought I should remind you, you have another little one to come home to and spoil like you clearly want to do with A-Yuan.”

“I know, Jiejie. I’m gonna try but you know I can’t promise anything more.” His breath catches when she wraps her arm around him, Jin Ling trapped between them. Her eyes are wet when he steps back and the sight is heartbreaking enough to trigger the curse again.

Wei Wuxian waves off her worry, kissing first her cheek then Jin Ling and A-Yuan’s, before turning to Jiang Cheng. “I’m as ready as I’ll ever be.”

Jiang Cheng nods, circling his hand in the air above him. “Let’s move out.”

Chapter End Notes

I absolutely thrive on kudos and comments (emojis are a valid form of communication!!)

you can find me on [tumblr](#) and [twitter](#)

I’m most active here and in a few servers on discord, like [Haven](#), which is a wonderful writing focused server, and [Danmei Destination](#), which is all things, well, Danmei lol

Tribulations

Chapter Notes

This piece is complete and will update Mondays and Thursdays

Big thanks to everyone who put up with me while I wrote this, your encouragement and assistance along the way mean the world to me. I couldn't have done it without you. And all the love in the world to [MsJulia](#) for making sure my love hate relationship with commas doesn't embarrass me and helped tweak a few areas to perfection.

Any errors are mine alone and are fixable, immediately, if pointed out!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It's a long flight made longer by Wei Wuxian's need to stop halfway to keep from being sick. Despite the delay, Wei Wuxian is grateful for the reprieve—being so close to Lan Wangji is causing the curse to gnaw away at his patience and pain tolerance.

“Hey, where are you going?” Jiang Cheng yells when he spots Wei Wuxian moving away from the group.

Wei Wuxian is too busy fighting his nausea to answer at first, but when Jiang Cheng blocks his way he doesn't have a choice. “I just need a minute alone,” he snaps.

“You don't need to be wandering around,” Jiang Cheng hisses.

Wei Wuxian motions to the group behind them. “What are you worried about? It's not like I've got a chance of escaping with all of you here. Any one of you could out maneuver and incapacitate me before I hit the tree line.”

“That's not the point!” Jiang Cheng argues, his posture radiating his growing aggravation.

Wei Wuxian crosses his arms, his chest tight with the flaring curse. “No, of course not, and you're the perfect picture of peace.”

Jiang Cheng growls low in his throat. “Why is it always a fight with you?”

Wei Wuxian speaks before his pain-addled brain can think of the consequences. “Because we were brought up to distrust each other; we were never allowed to just be ourselves. We were each other's competition on and off the training ground and now everyone has their own opinions about us and you can't do anything about it because your hands are tied and the sect will always come first.”

The crackle of Zidian is the only warning Wei Wuxian gets before he's thrown backwards to the hard ground. There is a collective gasp from the group and the rushing sound of people crossing the field. Wei Wuxian rolls onto his side and coughs up a mouthful of blood. He laughs once but the tears burning his eyes betray him as they slip free. He waves off Wen Qing and pulls himself to his feet again. Across from him Jiang Cheng is still boiling mad, his chest heaving with each breath, and at his side Zidian sparks dangerously.

"Have you no integrity, speaking of our upbringing like that? Everything you have was because of our generosity."

Lan Wangji steps between them and the memory of their fight inside the Jiang ancestral hall cuts across Wei Wuxian's consciousness like ice, draining his emotions and leaving him cold and surprisingly pain free for the first time since the night hunt in the woods. He scrubs his face clean and shifts his outer robe back into place, grateful to find it intact.

"I never denied that," he finally answers, "but you can't tell me it's not the truth. You can be mad at me all you want but I need you to know my allegiance has always been to the Jiang first. I've made mistakes but at the end of the day I did what had to be done to ensure the sect prospered and I will not apologize."

"What's the meaning of this?" Lan Qiren asks as he joins the five of them.

Wei Wuxian glances over his shoulder and is grateful to see everyone else keeping their distance. "Jiang-zongzhu was ensuring I..."

"Wei Wuxian spoke ill of the upbringing offered to him as a child and as his Sect Leader I enforced quick discipline to remind him of his filial piety." Jiang Cheng shakes out his sleeve with a sharp snap, Zidian wrapping around his wrist at the quick movement.

"His Sect Leader?" Nie Mingjue says, joining the growing group. "You declared he had been cast out of the Yunmeng Jiang Sect and branded him an enemy to the cultivation world after your duel."

"Do you not argue with your brother over his lack of cultivation?" Jiang Cheng argues. "Would you not cast him to the wolves in the heat of an argument then allow him back in hopes of helping him later?"

Nie Mingjue takes an aggressive step forward. "I would never!"

"This is an argument for later," Lan Qiren interrupts. "We are on a tight schedule and should not be late to the conference if we hope to raise our concerns before everything descends into chaos."

Wei Wuxian shakes his head with a self-deprecating laugh. "Such faith that anything to do with me will surely end in destruction." He turns away from the leaders and starts toward the other cultivators "Let's be on our way so I can be sentenced and everyone can move on to other affairs."

"Wei Ying," Lan Wangji reprimands as he follows a few steps behind.

Wei Wuxian waves off the statement, as he rubs Zidian's lash mark, where the curse has dug its claws in again. "I just want to get this over with. Your uncle is probably right—I have little hope of making it out of this unscathed."

The sun is past its zenith when they touch down just beyond Lanling's main gate. The retinue quickly falls in line as the group proceeds forward with the Lan in front and the Nie bringing up the rear so Wei Wuxian is sandwiched in the middle. Wei Wuxian would be impressed with the coordination and thought that obviously went into the whole thing if he wasn't so focused on not curling into himself because of the pain pulsing through his body.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Lan Wangji's voice is barely above a whisper, and he's leaning close enough that all Wei Wuxian can smell is the cool sandalwood scent that has always followed his husband—which is not helping at all.

"Nothing more than I've already asked of you," Wei Wuxian finally answers after they've passed the gate guards. "My only real concern is A-Yuan's safety and upbringing."

Lan Wangji only has time to nod before they are descended upon by cultivators sent down from Jin Guangshan. Wei Wuxian bites his tongue to keep from crying out when they yank him from the formation by his arm; his mouth filling with the sharp taste of blood.

Jiang Cheng forces himself between the cultivator on the left and Wei Wuxian—freeing his injured side. "That's uncalled for. He isn't going anywhere and he isn't a threat."

"You'll excuse my precautions. It has been a very trying week since Wei Wuxian's vicious escape," Jin Guangshan calls from midway down the steps.

Wei Wuxian laughs. "Vicious escape? I didn't lay a hand on Jin Zixun or his lackeys, and once outside your gilded walls, I was the one being hunted like wild game."

"Wei Wuxian," Jiang Cheng hisses.

Jin Guangshan shakes out his sleeves with a harsh breath. "I've never seen the servant of any sect dare be so arrogant, so proud as this one, if he agrees to hand over the Stygian Tiger Seal, I will gladly forgive any personal grievances and we can all wait in the banquet hall until everyone has arrived to discuss his other crimes."

Jin Guangyao approaches the cultivators with a bow. "Perhaps this would be better handled inside, out of the weather." And beyond sight of any prying eyes, Wei Wuxian thinks.

From his place at the top of the stairs Jin Guangshan cuts a quick glare at Jin Guangyao, then says, "Zixuan, come up and join your family."

Jin Zixuan glances at Jiang Cheng then looks right at Jin Guangyao. "I have family down here, so I believe I'll stay where I am."

Wei Wuxian opens his mouth, but is interrupted by Lan Qiren. "Somewhere more private would be best, for further discussions," he says as he leads the group up the stairs. "We have

another matter to discuss that only concerns the parties currently present.”

“There is a room just through here that should be large enough for our needs.” Jin Guangyao motions to the great hall, he is acknowledged with brief nods as the group follows his lead. At the top of the stairs he steps past Lan Qiren and crosses to the far side of the banquet hall to open a mostly hidden door.

Once everyone has filed into the room Lan Qiren turns to Jin Guangshan. “Before any allegations are raised against Wei Wuxian, I have questions concerning a former guest disciple of the Jin sect.” Lan Qiren waits for Jin Guangshan to nod before continuing, “Can you confirm if Xue Yang was a disciple and studied here in Lanling?”

“The Jin Sect is large, I do not have the privilege of learning every disciple’s name. I have members who coordinate our training regime so I can be free to focus my efforts on vital sect business, we could call for them if you wish,” Jin Guangshan says, placating.

“You ordered brother to find talented cultivators who weren’t opposed to learning Wei Wuxian’s unorthodox cultivation; Xue Yang was the most promising candidate located,” Jin Zixuan supplies.

Anger flashes across Jin Guangshan’s face, his eyes darting from Jin Zixuan to Jin Guangyao and back. “I had hoped it was only a rumor that you had been coerced by the Yiling Lazou but I see it must be true if you are telling sect secrets so freely.”

Wei Wuxian watches him straighten his sleeves and thinks of Wen Chao’s habit of doing the same thing. His unintended laugh sounds a little hysterical even to his ears and draws everyone’s attention. “Sorry, sorry. Wen Chao used to shake out and straighten his sleeves in a similar manner when he was frustrated or flustered.”

Jin Guangshan’s lip curls in disgust. “You are a menace and a threat that needs to be contained like those dogs you ran off with.”

Rage flares red hot in Wei Wuxian’s blood, its intensity matched by the curse in a wave that would have surely brought a lesser man to his knees. For one wild moment Wei Wuxian contemplates drawing the resentful energy lingering around the halls of Koi Tower to him and ending the sect leader’s life. It would solve some problems... and create several more. Instead he takes a deep breath and says in a low and deliberate voice, “Contained like you contained the Dafan-Wen? In squalor and disease with a whip across their back if they so much as looked a Jin guard in the eyes?”

Spurred on by the challenge Jin Guangshan crosses to Wei Wuxian. “They are worthless and should have been annihilated before the fires in Nightless City were extinguished, and if it hadn’t been for your interference they wouldn’t be an issue right now.”

Wei Wuxian straightens to his full height. “My interference,” he says, his voice going eerily calm, “saved the lives of innocent men and women and a child who will grow to be better than you in every way imaginable. I will not apologize for my actions, and I would save them all again in a heartbeat.”

Jin Guangshan is quick, but Jiang Cheng is faster, his fingers closing around Jin Guangshan's wrist, stopping his hand millimeters from Wei Wuxian's cheek.

"We are here for a discussion concerning the Yungmeng Jiang's current heir to the sect. Assaulting him when he hasn't raised a hand against anyone since arriving will not be overlooked."

"You dare!" Jin Guangshan roars, ripping his hand free. "That degenerate has proven that destruction follows his every step and yet you allow him back into your home? Did you not learn the first time he burned your sect to the ground?"

Jiang Cheng's jaw works, the grinding of his teeth audible. "Wen Chao burned our home. No one will be repeating that act unless you plan to do it yourself. And Wei Wuxian took revenge on behalf of Yunmeng Jiang the first time—he contributed more to the Sunshot victory than you or your sect. If anyone is welcome at Lotus Pier, it's him."

Lan Qiren's voice is quiet but assertive, drawing everyone's attention. "Enough. There are things that must be discussed before your conference can begin." Turning to Lan Wangji he says, "Take Wei Wuxian to another room where the others can stand guard outside."

Wei Wuxian immediately argues. "I'm not leaving this room. If this conversation is to involve me, it will involve me."

Lan Qiren gives him a look that easily translates to *stubborn boy*, then says, "Fine, let us settle at the tables and proceed."

Unsurprisingly Jin Guangshan has an answer or alibi for everything under scrutiny at the camps. He also has convenient scapegoats to pin horrendous actions on. By the time dinner is being served they've gotten nowhere and Wei Wuxian is livid. Thankfully, Lan Qiren had arrived with a well thought out plan and the means to execute it, providing Wei Wuxian with enough motivation to hold his tongue for the most part.

The servers arrange themselves around the edge of the room, awaiting their cue. The sight leaves a bad taste in Wei Wuxian's mouth as he thinks of the countless innocent souls who have suffered under their sect leader. His stomach turns further as he catches Jin Guangshan eyeing the maid closest to him before waving off the newest line of questions.

"Qiren, it's clear you have a list as long as your rules, let's break for dinner and a bit of entertainment."

Lan Qiren places his hand on the low table and leans forward, the thinness of his patience clear in his actions. "It is unbecoming for entertainment at this time. Any meal should be conducted in haste so we can return to the matter at hand."

Jin Guangshan sighs. "Fine, fine." He claps once, a sharp sound that echoes in the room, and the servers spring into action arranging bowls and cups on each table. When they move back to the far wall, bowed deeply to everyone seated, each of the low tables are identical.

“Let us eat,” Jin Guangshan says, taking a large bite.

Wei Wuxian makes a point to move food around but doesn't actually eat anything. After a few minutes, Lan Wangji takes a bite of fish from the dish he's been eating and passes it to Wei Wuxian. The gesture reminds him so much of his husband that Wei Wuxian can't help but smile. Once the offer is accepted Lan Wangji swaps the bowl of rice he'd eaten from with Wei Wuxian's. The meal continues this way until Lan Wangji has tasted and exchanged each dish from his table to Wei Wuxian's. Wei Wuxian isn't stupid enough to think they haven't been spotted but he can't be bothered to care. Instead he turns his attention to Lan Wangji who cleans their cups and samples both pots before pouring tea for Wei Wuxian.

With his emotions high, Wei Wuxian hopes the curse will ease enough so maybe he won't suffer the whole night.

Beyond them the sect leaders have begun to talk again. He can hear Nie Mingjue asking pointed questions and the sound of paper rustling as he provides evidence for whichever case he's arguing. Jin Guangshan is obviously getting angrier with each item and, as hoped, Jin Guangyao has fallen completely silent as Jin Zixuan implicates his father of emotional manipulation with the intent of using him as a scapegoat.

“He is losing, he knows it,” Lan Wangji whispers as he refills Wei Wuxian's cup.

As if to prove Lan Wangji's point, Jin Zixuan squares his shoulders. “Will you deny telling myself, mother, and Qin Cangye that Jin Guangyao would only be around as long as he's useful and not in the way? Mother was angry with you for a month because of that argument.”

“Your mother is always displeased with me,” Jin Guangshan hisses. “Her anger is neither here nor there.”

“Then perhaps we should discuss how you told me to stay out of the far west court where Xue Yang was moved after your little experiments started?”

“It was for your safety!” Jin Guangshan snaps.

“And Jin Guangyao? I know you ordered him to organize and recruit cultivators to ensure everything was up and running as quickly as possible.” Jin Zixuan pauses to glance from Nie Mingjue to Jin Guangyao then back to his father. “You made him go directly against his sworn brothers and caused the beginning of a divide that would have forced them to stand against each other and isolated Jin Guangyao in a way that would have made your manipulation that much easier.”

“At least Jin Guangyao knows how to put this sect first!” Jin Guangshan explodes.

Wei Wuxian sees Jin Zixuan smile, a predatory thing he's never seen before. “You're right, Father, he does put the sect first. But so do I.” From the qiankun pouch he pulls from his sleeve, Jin Zixuan produces a few small journals and a stack of bound letters all bearing Jin Guangshan's personal seal. “If you will not admit to the atrocities in the camps then we'll have to discuss your need to keep trophies from the innocent people you forced yourself on,

including the sixteen year old second daughter of the Mo estate.” He brandishes a particular letter from the pile. “Besides Jin Guangyao and Mo Xuanyu, how many other children have you abandoned? Better yet, how many times have you ordered women to be killed to keep them quiet or take care of unwanted problems?”

Wei Wuxian chokes on the drink he’d just taken.

“Wei Ying?” Lan Wangji asks quietly.

“I’m fine. The audacity of that man never ceases to amaze me,” he answers at the same volume after clearing his throat.

Lan Wangji hums. “Some believe their status makes them immune to any consequences; that any consequence that may occur can be banished with money or force.” He hesitates for a second then pours a cup of wine from the jar on his tray.

Wei Wuxian smiles as he takes the cup. “That belief bit him in the ass the first time too. Greed gets you nothing but heartache and grievances.”

Behind them Jin Guangshan rages, his face an angry red color.

Wei Wuxian lifts his cup. “To better outcomes this time around,” he toasts before throwing the drink back in a single shot. He makes a face at the lower quality alcohol, but doesn’t protest when Lan Wangji refills his cup.

He smiles, drinking this one in a single gulp as well. “It’s definitely not Emperor’s Smile. Perhaps next time I’m in Gusu...”

Wei Wuxian pauses as heat washes through his body, fanning out from his belly to his limbs. With his heart racing, he drags in a startled breath as a numbness follows the heat. As if from underwater he hears Lan Wangji call his name.

He wants to tell him it’ll be ok. Not to be scared, but his head spins as he turns and he feels his body topple, out of control and twisting—and then the world goes black.

Chapter End Notes

I thrive on kudos and comments (emojis are a valid form of communication!!)

if you want to yell at me, you can find me on [tumblr](#) and [twitter](#)

but I'm most active here and in a few servers on discord, like [Haven](#), which is a wonderful writing focused server, and [Danmei Destination](#) which is all things, well, Danmei lol

Journey

Chapter Notes

forgive me for chapter 6, I'll leave you with this longer chapter as my apology

This piece is complete and will update Mondays and Thursdays

Big thanks to everyone who put up with me while I wrote this, your encouragement and assistance along the way mean the world to me. I couldn't have done it without you. And all the love in the world to [MsJulia](#) for making sure my love hate relationship with commas doesn't embarrass me and helped tweak a few areas to perfection.

Any errors are mine alone and are fixable, immediately, if pointed out!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The first thing Wei Wuxian notices is the gentle notes of a Gusu Lan healing song. He's warm, a blanket tucked tightly around him in a way he usually can't with his restless sleep. The music stops abruptly when he pushes his arm free of the covers, Lan Wangji appearing at his bedside a moment later.

He tries to speak but the words come out broken, he clears his throat and tries again. "Where am I?"

Lan Wangji pulls a talisman from his robe and activates it as he retrieves a glass of water. Sliding his arm under Wei Wuxian's shoulders, he ensures all the water is finished before answering. "Lotus Pier."

Wei Wuxian shakes his head. "I don't understand."

"We returned immediately after."

Wei Wuxian accepts and finishes a second glass, he's still confused but pushes on. "Have you been here the whole time?"

Lan Wangji nods.

"It wasn't your fault," Wei Wuxian says as he waits for Lan Wangji to sit on the edge of the bed. Every fiber of his being wants to take his hand. "I just hope something was said about the poisoned wine being served on your tray."

Lan Wangji hesitates, then gently lifts Wei Wuxian's hand. "Jin Zixuan had the servers involved immediately banished from Koi Tower. He and Jin Guangyao are leading the restructuring of the sect."

The information doesn't make sense to Wei Wuxian. "Restructuring," he repeats, distracted by the feel of Lan Wangji's thumb brushing over his knuckles.

Before Lan Wangji can respond, the door to Wei Wuxian's room whisks open revealing his siblings and an obviously concerned Wen Qing.

"About damn time!" Jiang Cheng growls when he locks eyes with Wei Wuxian.

"A-Cheng. Let Wen-daifu check him first," Jiang Yanli scolds.

Wen Qing pays the outburst no attention as she crosses the room. Lan Wangji shuffles to the side so she can have better access to Wei Wuxian but doesn't immediately release Wei Wuxian's hand, instead holding on until she is close enough to take it in her own, then he gets up to be out of her way. She nods to Lan Wangji as she presses two fingers to Wei Wuxian's wrist.

"Concentrate and tell me how you're feeling."

"And don't lie. This is important," Jiang Cheng snaps when Wei Wuxian glances around.

Terrified of what he'll find Wei Wuxian takes a deep breath causing pain to cut across his chest. "I'm fine. Deep breaths hurt." He uses his free hand to prod at the edge of the wound on his side, then along the ridge of a rib and across his chest. "It feels like a dragon sat on my chest?"

Wen Qing nods. "I heard at least one rib crack when Jiang-zongzhu was doing compressions."

Wei Wuxian splays his fingers apart and presses just a little in the center of his chest. It aches, but after a few measured breaths the pain eases. "I..." he starts, stops, then shifts his foot, trying to loosen the covers. "Can I sit up?"

Wen Qing lets go of his hand. "If you aren't in too much pain. Do you need a hand?"

Wei Wuxian shakes his head as he slowly sits up. The movement worsens the ache of the injuries to his torso and a muscle twinges in his back. "How long have I been out?"

"Three days. You're lucky Jiejie found A-Yuan after he ran off to hide when we got back with you. What did you teach him on that mountain of yours?" Jiang Cheng demands, stepping away from Jiang Yanli.

"Can I see him?" Wei Wuxian asks, all thoughts of the exam vanishing from his mind.

"You just woke up!"

"Please," Wei Wuxian says.

Jiang Yanli places her hand on Jiang Cheng's arm, stopping his next protest. "As soon as we make sure you are well, I'll bring him in for you. Can you finish telling us what you feel?"

Wei Wuxian nods, turning his attention back to himself. “I don’t feel any extra pain from the curse. It hasn’t lashed out at all since I woke up,” he says after a moment then readjusts himself so he can slide a little closer to the head of the bed. He uses the movement to check his overall pain levels.

“I’m stiff from laying still for so long, but otherwise I don’t feel anything unusual beyond my old aches and pains, and the general state of my torso now.”

“And your meridians?” Wen Qing asks like the traitor she is.

Wei Wuxian shakes his head. “The weight of the curse is gone, it feels like before, after the surgery... before Burial Mounds. I can feel the echo of Lan Zhan’s playing but nothing more.”

Wen Qing lifts his hand, turning his wrist to press her fingers to his pulse point. “May I?”

The room is quiet as she concentrates. Wei Wuxian can feel her energy making its way through his meridians. The feeling is familiar to all the times she’d done it before, and yet...

“Something is different,” they say at the same time.

Jiang Cheng steps closer. “What do you mean different?”

Everyone remains quiet while Wei Wuxian focuses on the covers for a few heartbeats before looking at his brother. “I don’t know what it was like for you, but for me, I lost the feeling of potential even a small core gives. Until the resentment filled all the hollow bits, there was just an emptiness, like it never existed.”

Jiang Yanli slips in front of Jiang Cheng to sit on the end of the bed. “Oh, A-Xian, was it the loss that led you to working with resentment?”

Wei Wuxian takes her hand when she offers it. “I did what was necessary to survive. It would have been easier to let the Burial Mounds consume me, but I knew I had responsibilities here.”

Her face crumples, her eyes shining with sadness. “A sense of obligation should not come before your health and happiness. You don’t have to keep putting us before yourself.”

He shakes their joined hands. “It kept me alive. And it seems to have worked out. I’m here now, with a body free of resentment and the curse that was actively trying to kill me.”

Pausing, Wei Wuxian looks up, addressing the others. “What happened?”

“It was a fast acting poison,” Lan Wangji says.

“Jin Guangshan used the situation to barter. An antidote for the seal,” Wen Qing adds.

Wei Wuxian’s attention snaps to Lan Wangji. “Tell me you didn’t give it to him,” Wei Wuxian says, a new terror turning his stomach.

Lan Wangji wears his emotions like he always does, his conviction obvious as his face shifts into smooth jade. “I will not apologize for my actions.”

“What? Why? I trusted you! You all know how dangerous that thing is? Do you know what he’ll be capable of now that he has that kind of power?” Wei Wuxian turns, his legs slipping over the edge of the bed. Wen Qing’s hand snaps to his shoulder, holding him in place.

Caught in the grasp of anger and despair, Wei Wuxian wants to cry. Any chance they had is gone now, washed away because the only person he believed he could trust not to act irrationally... did. His Lan Zhan, maybe—but so early? Before their marriage, before even speaking of their feelings? Even this, the one thing he thought was right without question, has led to disaster.

Lan Wangji doesn’t flinch, the only proof of his emotions showing in how tightly his fists are clenched. “He is of no concern,” he says when it’s clear Wei Wuxian is waiting for an answer.

Wei Wuxian’s ribs protest as he twists around and succeeds in freeing himself from Wen Qing’s grasp. “The hell he isn’t! That seal is volatile on its best day and if someone doesn’t know how to harness the power it can lash out and kill thousands,” he yells as he stands, unsteady but determined.

“Your seal is possessive,” Lan Wangji says, holding his ground as Wei Wuxian crosses the short distance between them until they are within arms reach. “It is also sentient and quite determined when it has a goal to achieve.”

Wei Wuxian wants to scream. “Which is another reason he shouldn’t have it!” He doesn’t acknowledge Wen Qing or Jiang Cheng when they call his name. “Why would you do it? I don’t care what he was offering! You knew the danger!”

Lan Wangji pulls the little qiankun pouch from his sleeve and offers it to Wei Wuxian.

“I gave that to you. I don’t want it back. I wanted you to keep those things safe,” he snaps.

“Each item is still accounted for,” Lan Wangji says as he loosens the ties and pulls the seal from the bag.

Wei Wuxian recoils, stumbling back a step as if slapped. The sight of the seal, perfectly calm in Lan Wangji’s hand, makes no sense.

“A-Xian.” Jiang Yanli takes Wei Wuxian’s arm in her hands, startling him further. When he looks at her she continues. “Jin Guangshan is dead. The official ruling was heart failure. He died as we were reviving you.”

“The official ruling,” he repeats, and she nods. Wei Wuxian’s eyes lock back on the seal and he feels a tear trace down his cheek. “I don’t stand a chance. I’ll be branded the murderer of a sect leader.”

He takes a step back, away from everyone and shakes his head with a strangled laugh. “All I wanted was to fix whatever I could and make it back to the future one way or the other. I

should have known better.”

“Wei Wuxian, you need to sit down.” Wen Qing says, holding still near his bed.

Jiang Cheng reaches out and snags Jiang Yanli’s arm, tugging her to his own side—then guiding her behind his back. “Stop being dramatic, no one is saying you killed anyone.”

Wei Wuxian steps back again, making more space between himself and the others. “You don’t understand. I wasn’t even alive and I was being blamed for famines and deaths across the countryside. People made a living selling charms to ward against my reported evil powers. Or worse, wielded me as a charm myself—portraits of the hideous, evil Yiling Patriarch to keep the many less terrible spirits from your door.”

Jiang Cheng crosses the distance and grabs Wei Wuxian’s arm. “That’s ridiculous.”

Wei Wuxian tries to shake Jiang Cheng’s hand, stepping back a third time; his back hitting the wall. “It’s not! You can ask Lan Zhan or Jin Ling. They both saw the merchant.”

“A-Xian...” Jiang Yanli’s voice has taken on a worried tone.

“It was right after I came back, Jin Ling and Fairy showed up...” Wei Wuxian snaps his mouth shut, disrupting his already shallow breathing. “Will he get Fairy this time? He loves that dog... I love that dog.” Dragging in a ragged breath he looks beyond Jiang Cheng and says, “What else have I messed up?”

Jiang Yanli moves between her brothers, slipping her hand under Jiang Cheng’s, and gently pressing her youngest brother back a step, “A-Xian, it’s okay, whatever it is, it’ll be okay. Think of all the good things that have come from your actions.”

Jiang Cheng shakes his head. “It’s just a stupid dog. You don’t even like dogs.”

“It’s not, you don’t understand, Fairy is all he had when he was alone at night.” Jiang Yanli’s quiet gasp is loud in the silence that follows his outburst.

Lan Wangji steps next to Jiang Yanli, his hand gentle on Wei Wuxian’s shoulder. “Wei Ying, Jin-zongzhu and Jin shao furen are alive and well. Your actions mean their son will be surrounded by a family that did not exist the first time.”

Wei Wuxian shakes his head, eyes closed tight. “What if my presence here, now, ruins something in the future? I wasn’t there for any of this, what if me being alive tips the balance for something in the future?”

The pricks from Wen Qing’s needles are so quick Wei Wuxian doesn’t have a chance to turn his head. “Qing-jie?” he says as his knees go weak.

Lan Wangji catches him before he has a chance to fall.

“The immediate threat has been removed and your mind is trying to fill the void with the possible consequences of your actions. You’ll be healthier in a few days and we can have this discussion again.”

Wei Wuxian can't help but feel betrayed as his body relaxes and his mind quiets.

"This will help him sleep for the rest of today and tomorrow," Wen Qing says in explanation to Jiang Cheng's angry rant—that Wei Wuxian's slowing mind can't translate.

Wei Wuxian, his eyes heavy, blinks slowly and has no way of stopping a tear from escaping as Wen Qing brushes his bangs out of his face the way she did before they brought Wen Ning back. He hopes that when he wakes this time, they won't all be dead.

Beyond the edges of consciousness, Wei Wuxian can hear the sound of a child's whispered conversation; it fills his heart with warmth and he knows this is what paradise should be.

"What happens if you sit quietly for too long?"

"The longer you sit quietly the more you are able to understand how long you need to sit quietly," Lan Wangji explains softly.

"But what if sitting quietly doesn't help you learn?"

An unmistakable warmth fills Lan Wangji's voice when he answers, "Then we will find something to help your mind relax."

There is a rustle of clothes and a tiny mmph, as A-Yuan shifts around. "Like what?"

After a moment Lan Wangji laughs, a soft, breathy sound. In this time, Wei Wuxian thinks he hasn't ever heard that sound before, but it reminds him of home. "If sitting quietly doesn't work, then we will find an activity that helps your mind center itself and find quietness."

"Popo says Xian-gege will be awake soon. He never sleeps this long. Will he wake up like Wen-shushu?"

"Wei Ying will not be like Wen Qionglin, but he will need time to heal."

A-Yuan hums, then asks in a whisper, "Are the gold people looking for him like how they're looking for us?"

There is a shuffle of cloth before Lan Wangji answers just as quietly as A-Yuan had been. "The Jin Sect are no longer looking for Wei Ying or you and your family. Would you like me to escort you back to your Popo?"

A-Yuan shifts again, the soft sound of cloth on cloth. "Can I stay here and draw? Xian-gege lets me draw on his scrap paper when he's working."

"Mn, as long as we remain quiet, we can stay."

The sound of movement, papers shifting, and the grinding of an ink stone fills the room. Soothing in its normalcy, Wei Wuxian finds himself fighting a futile battle against the

darkness as it begins to close in again. He needs to be awake, there's too much to prepare for... too much he's missing out on.

When Wei Wuxian wakes again he lies perfectly still assessing his body from top to bottom. Most of the pain has subsided and the overall weakness seems to be gone. Experimentally he begins rotating his joints, checking for stiffness. When he finds nothing immediately concerning, Wei Wuxian slowly sits up. Lit only by the low light of pre-dawn, the room is filled with shadows that he watches until the sun chases them away.

Beyond the noises of Lotus Pier waking, Wei Wuxian hears familiar footsteps on the walkways leading to his rooms. A few moments later Jiang Yanli slides the door open with her foot, a heavy tray in her hands. He's on his feet and across the room before he can think about it, startling a reprimand from her as he takes the tray.

"You shouldn't move like that, what if you tear the stitches again?"

Setting the tray down, he presses his hand against the wound on his side. "It's healing better than it was, there's almost no pain." She gives him a dubious look but allows him to help her settle.

"How long has it been?" he asks once he is seated across from her.

"Two since you woke up here, five since we almost lost you."

Wei Wuxian shakes his head. "Be honest, how bad is it out there?"

She watches him for a moment, clasping his hand before speaking. "The narrative we are pushing portrays you as a bystander with the rest of us. It addresses your poisoning and Jin Guangshan's refusal to give us the antidote unless we surrendered the seal. It also explains that Lan Wangji was in possession of the seal, not you."

"That makes the Lans accomplices to my crimes. There's no way the elders are going to be ok with this, especially not Lan-xiansheng," Wei Wuxian interrupts.

"Lan-xiansheng suggested we include that part. He reasoned that Hanguang-jun's reputation would shield him from most criticism and since neither of you have been in proximity to one another since before I visited Yiling it could be implied that you handed the seal over ages ago."

Wei Wuxian is floored. This is something he wouldn't even expect from Lan Qiren in the future, who, even after decades, still tends to protect his nephews' reputations at the expense of Wei Wuxian's. "Why would Lan-xiansheng do that? He detests me."

Jiang Yanli shakes her head. "He did not explain his reasoning. He did point out that after Lan Wangji's visit to Yiling, no one reported seeing you in public again until the invitation was sent. Speaking of, one of the younger disciples brought this back after his rounds last

night. He said a stranger in white robes with black trim asked it be delivered once he finished his patrol.” She pulls a simple envelope from her sleeve.

Wei Wuxian’s hand shakes as he closes around the fragile feeling paper. On its front, his birth name is written clearly, with smooth confident strokes. On the back is a beautiful wax seal containing the intricate lines of an array. The time and care it must have taken to create are not lost to him as he runs his finger around the raised edge.

“No one tried to open it?” he asks, turning the envelope over again.

She lays her hand on top of his. “You are not a prisoner, A-Xian; no one is monitoring your correspondence. You can open it after breakfast—after I’ve left—if you want.”

Wei Wuxian turns the envelope over and decides to make a copy of the array before breaking it. He laments its frailty; if it were more robust, he would create a ta-pian. The rubbing would be beautiful. Nonetheless he quickly retrieves parchment and ink and sets about recreating the seal.

“A-Xian, you need to eat first, it will be here once you finish,” Jiang Yanli protests.

Glancing up he catches her eye. “Let me copy this, then we’ll eat... I would like you here, if you can stay after we are finished.”

She hums but does not distract him while he makes quick work of the inkstone, then watches as he transcribes the work with gentle, smooth strokes. Her smile is soft but pulls at Wei Wuxian’s heart. The last time he saw it was on the battlefield as she scolded him for not staying after Jin Zixuan was killed.

“I’m sorry.” He says, setting the letter and newly inked sketch to the side.

Jiang Yanli watches him fill her bowl before speaking. “A-Xian, don’t you know I don’t blame you for any event that never happened.”

Wei Wuxian picks at pieces of grilled meat. “It’s nice to hear.”

Reaching out she takes his hand. “Perhaps one day you will find enough peace to balance your history.”

Wei Wuxian hums as he finishes filling her bowl before moving on to his. A memory of his husband comes unbidden, filling his senses with love and a sensation of loss he hasn’t figured out how to handle.

They eat in quiet company, the silence only broken by Jiang Yanli’s soft stories and the sounds of Lotus Pier thriving in the distance. Wei Wuxian takes in each story but can’t shake a growing anxiety at the multitude of things that can still go wrong. He lets his anxiety simmer, focusing instead on trying to find the contentment and love his sister is so clearly expressing.

Jiang Yanli sets her chopsticks down. “If you’re finished, A-Xian, we can open the letter.”

Wei Wuxian ducks his head, caught out like a child by an all knowing mother. He moves a bite around a bit more, taking his time to gather his courage before he too sets his chopsticks down and sets about clearing the table. He shuts down Yanli's protest as quickly as he can. "It's the least I can do, jie. Besides I'm feeling better today."

"You'll have to forgive my concern," Yanli says to him as he crosses the room with the tray. "We nearly lost you again, and I can't help but think there were so many moments I missed along the way that would have lessened your pain."

Wei Wuxian's natural instinct is to comfort her and tell her there was nothing she could have done, but time has taught him that even if those words are true, they do not alleviate the guilt that has set in. Instead he says, "I hope we both have the chance to learn we are better for the things we've survived and that neither of us holds a grudge for what was done or support that wasn't given." Jiang Yanli snuffles and Wei Wuxian gives her a moment before turning around. "Should we see what the mysterious letter holds?"

"You know who it's from?" she says, watching him cross back to the table.

He rubs his sleeve across the wood to ensure it is dry before placing the letter in front of himself. "I have a suspicion." When he brushes his thumb over the wax ridges, the seal is cool under his fingertips. It quickly heats enough to melt, then evaporates.

"Oh." Yanli leans forward, "I've never seen anything like that before." She sounds delighted, her excitement bolstering Wei Wuxian's, above even his anxiety.

"I can teach you some pretty amazing ones," he offers, pausing as he opens the scroll. Her enthusiastic nod brings a smile to his face as he looks back to the parchment.

He's silent as he reads, his heart rate steadily increasing with each word. It's one thing to assume and another to see the proof written in ink before him. The words blur and he hears his sister's intake of breath and rustling clothes as she rounds the table and envelopes him in her arms.

"A-Xian, what is it?"

"The Immortal, Baoshan Sanren." He has to swallow twice before he can speak again. "She knows I'm not from this time and wants to meet with me."

"May I?" she asks and Wei Wuxian nods, handing over the scroll. Her eyes quickly skim the letter. "How does she know this?"

Wei Wuxian shakes his head. "I don't know, but she's the only person I'm not surprised or worried about finding out."

Jiang Yanli chews her lip for a moment. "Didn't father always say that anyone who descended her mountain was never allowed back up?"

"That's what the legend says but I know of at least one time a student returned."

"Who could have told her though?"

Wei Wuxian takes the scroll back and secures it before hoisting himself to his feet. “I won't even pretend to know.”

“Where are you going?” Yanli asks, following him to the door.

“The library, I know there's a book that will help me break the code.”

Jiang Yanli stops just inside the door. “What code?”

Wei Wuxian smiles. “She hid directions to her mountain in the letter.”

Lost in a stack of books and notes, Wei Wuxian pays little attention to the shaft of sunlight as it stretches across the floor before receding again. It isn't until the warmth of sandalwood fills his senses that time begins to register once more. With his mind a million li from the world around him he says, “Come to find your wayward husband?”

His brain catches up a heartbeat later and his head snaps up to find Lan Wangji motionless at the door.

“Husband?” he says cautiously, with an undercurrent that leaves Wei Wuxian's throat tight with sadness.

“Have you been well?” he redirects. “Personally, I've noticed the only pain I have since waking is from the physical and mental imperfections of this decaying body.”

“Don't.” Lan Wangji snaps, striding across to loom over Wei Wuxian. “Stop talking like you don't have more strength and intelligence than anyone else I know.”

Wei Wuxian shrugs with a smile. “It's not a lie, but I think I might have caught a break by being poisoned.”

Lan Wangji watches him for a moment before sitting and changing the subject himself. “Jin shao furen said you received an important letter.”

Wei Wuxian nods, passing it across; he watches Lan Wangji as he reads it. “It can only be from Baoshan Sanren. I think I've figured out where I'm supposed to meet a disciple to ascend the mountain.”

Lan Wangji glances at the papers strewn across the table top. “How will you get there?”

Wei Wuxian shuffles his notes into a loose semblance of order and taps them into a neat stack. “Walk, most likely. I can't imagine I'm supposed to bring anyone. I know she's very protective of her way of life and this is breaking everything she usually stands for by inviting me up.”

“You shouldn't go alone,” is all Lan Wangji says as Wei Wuxian organizes the books and manuscripts then begins returning each item to its rightful place. The silence between them is broken only by bird song.

“You spoke of the forests of Gusu as though they were your home. Were you happy, there?” Lan Wangji says when Wei Wuxian returns to the table. The timber of his voice is low, gentle, like he's scared of breaking a spell, but Wei Wuxian does not miss the hesitation.

Wei Wuxian smiles despite the sting behind his eyes. “I was happier than I’d ever been in either life. *Both* of us are—we're happy. It wasn’t easy at first, so much had happened. Not everyone was pleased with our union, but it didn’t matter. We knew where we stood with each other and nothing could stop us.”

Lan Wangji is quiet, a growing apprehension evident in every line of his body and Wei Wuxian is struck by the taste of homesickness. He isn’t used to the way he can both read and be completely blind to Lan Wangji’s thoughts. He misses the ease in which they used to communicate and immediately hates himself more for making a divide as if this young man and his future husband aren’t one and the same. He lets the loneliness settle around his shoulders like a mantle. How can he miss someone so much when he’s sitting mere feet from him.

Wei Wuxian smooths the letter before folding it and putting it away. There are a million things he wants to say but he holds his tongue knowing he can’t be the one to continue this conversation. He watches Lan Wangji for a moment more, then looks toward an open window.

“There were only a few night hunts we fought about,” he says, his vision losing focus on the world outside. “There was this one case that seemed cut and dry, but you didn't like the idea of me going alone, so I compromised by offering to take the juniors since they were all visiting and never turned down a chance to go hunting with either of us.” He glances over to see if Lan Wangji is watching; he is, of course.

“You were helping with classes and the case couldn’t wait. The morning I left, we argued. You were worried, and said as much. You understood the importance of the case, but held firm that we should go together. I didn't think it could wait.”

“The outcome?” Lan Wangji prompts, when Wei Wuxian doesn’t continue.

“It ended up being far more serious than we were led to believe and something bad happened.”

Wei Wuxian catches the hesitation in Lan Wangji’s eyes as he asks, “Was it the case that sent you here?”

“It was the case that sent me here.” He nods, heavy hearted, “I know if anything happens to me here, my not being there will be a devastating blow to everyone I cherish and hold dear but I won’t apologize for going. My actions saved the lives of my family, both then and now.” He looks away for a moment to compose himself. “I just hope—no matter what happens—that everyone understands, and forgives me for my choices if I don’t live long enough to see those days again.” He takes a deep breath and tries to swallow around the lump in his throat.

“If able, you would return.”

“It’s where I came from.” Wei Wuxian answers immediately without considering the implications of his words...which cut bone deep if the way Lan Wangji’s face shutters—all emotion gone in a single breath. Wei Wuxian back peddles. “But staying here, getting to live my life like this, isn’t the worst fate I could suffer. This isn’t some almost world where I’m a stranger and you’re just an approximation of the Lan Zhan who grows to be the man I know and trust in the future. As far as I can tell this is my past. My first life.”

Across from him Lan Wangji watches him, unmoving except for a tightening in the corner of his eyes that causes an itch to burrow deeper under Wei Wuxian’s skin the longer the silence stretches on.

Finally, Lan Wangji takes what can only be described as a shuddering breath and says, “What if we are not one and the same? If you leave, do we get our Wei Ying back?”

Wei Wuxian can only sit stunned. “I...” he starts, stopping to swallow before deciding to answer the second question first. “According to the research Wen Qing and I have done since waking here, I don’t think I’m going to make it back to my future by any means beyond surviving one day at a time.”

Wei Wuxian runs his hands over the smooth tabletop, he takes a few deep breaths to help organize his thoughts before continuing, “As for your other concerns, I believe, wholeheartedly, that you are the younger self of the same Lan Zhan that grew into adulthood while I wasn’t alive to witness it.” He pauses, leaning a little to catch Lan Wangji’s eye. “I have every reason to believe I am the Wei Ying from this time, except now I share memories from a future I’m desperately trying to make better for everyone I hold dear. It’s not another timeline. I still am your Wei Ying, just... different.”

Silence falls around them again and Lan Wangji matches Wei Wuxian’s intensity. Goosebumps rise along Wei Wuxian’s arms as a chill runs up his spine; he’d forgotten what it felt like to be under Lan Wangji’s full scrutiny.

When he finally breaks the silence, Lan Wangji’s voice is even but edged with a warning Wei Wuxian can’t quite translate. “Since you do not believe you can return, and you are trying to alter the future, does that include the events that led to your death?”

Wei Wuxian sits up straighter. “I know exactly what killed me the first time, if that’s what you’re asking. I understand it better, which gives me a better chance of surviving this time around.”

“Can you not alter the event?” Lan Wangji asks.

Wei Wuxian shakes his head. “This is something that must be done.”

“Despite the inherent risks,” Lan Wangji continues stubbornly.

“Everything has risks, Lan Zhan.”

“If you must do this, will you share the knowledge of the incident to prevent the same outcome?”

Wei Wuxian chews his lip. “It really was out of my control at the time and I'm not sure if telling anyone would make a difference if it came down to it.”

Lan Wangji's hands fist up in his lap, his growing anger clear in the rigid line of his shoulders. “By your own admission you are surrounded by people who love and support you, but you refuse help and isolate yourself, just as you did during the war.”

Wei Wuxian recoils and has to take an extra breath to ensure his voice is as soft as he can make it when he speaks. “That's not fair, the war was different. I was terrified and alone and didn't think I had anything to lose. Besides, if there was a task that you, specifically, were trained to handle that no one else has even tried before, could you live with yourself if you allowed someone inexperienced to be involved?” Wei Wuxian gives him a moment then continues, “And if you know the task is almost guaranteed to be a death sentence, would you, Lan Zhan, allow anyone you loved to take your place?”

“It's not the same.”

“It is and you know it,” Wei Wuxian says. “Why would I willingly let any of you put yourselves in a dangerous situation that would jeopardize your future?”

Lan Wangji holds his gaze. “Do you not deserve the same opportunity?”

“I would hope so but the universe doesn't seem to like me much,” Wei Wuxian says with a laugh. When Lan Wangji glares at him, he continues, “When I was brought back, in the future, we had our whole lives ahead of us. It was beautiful. But now... now the best I can do is look you in the face and tell you I'll never be your equal.” He drags in a breath, suddenly overwhelmed with the truth of his confession. “In the future we could have had lifetimes together to wander the countryside helping people and giving peace to restless spirits and now... we'll be lucky if we get to enjoy more than a handful of decades. If we even get a handful of decades.”

He laughs again, watery and self-deprecating. “All I have to offer is this decaying body that might not last more than a few seasons. What kind of promise is that, Lan Zhan?” His breath shudders out of him as he wipes his eyes. “If I can't have the future I want, why shouldn't I be able to choose how I go?”

After Wei Wuxian has had a moment to gather himself Lan Wangji asks, “Is it really so dire?”

Wei Wuxian debates whether the whole truth would make everything worse or not and quickly decides he's tired of lying. “From the beginning I used resentful energy to slowly mend the damage from my fall into the Burial Mounds—my hips and spine were crushed on impact and until I learned to control it I was more paralyzed than not. I survived the war by desperation only and when the darkness finally took me while destroying the seal, it was the first time I'd known peace since before Lotus Pier fell.”

The more he talks the more clinical the words become, emotion washing away with every syllable. “After I flushed the resentful energy from my body in the cave, I noticed old pains creeping back in. Without a core, channeling any cultivation through my body in hopes of healing is a pointless endeavor.” Wei Wuxian's voice trails off as he remembers the sensation

of Lan Wangji pouring everything into him after nightless city his first life and again in the cave after his great escape from Lanling.

“Perhaps Wen Qing,” Lan Wangji begins and Wei Wuxian shakes his head.

“Absolutely not. She didn’t want to do the transfer in the first place and I will not insinuate now that I regret my choice. I know now it wasn’t really mine to make but I will not apologize for my actions. They saved Jiang Cheng and in the end helped defeat a tyrant. This is my bed to lay in.” Wei Wuxian shrugs. “I won’t pin all my hopes on a miracle now.” They lapse back into silence, the both of them looking away from one another after a heartbeat of clear stubbornness.

The sound of tiny feet approaching at a full run draws their attention to the doors, A-Yuan shoving his way in a moment later with a smile spreading across his face as he spots them both. Wen Qing follows a few paces behind, her eyes sharp and assessing. Wei Wuxian finds his arms full before he can say more than A-Yuan’s name, the impact knocking a laugh from him. He adjusts the wiggling bundle with a shake of his head when Wen Qing begins to scold him.

“Let him enjoy himself, is this not what we fought for?”

“You spoil him,” she says, sitting down at the end of the cleaned table. She gives him another assessing look before turning her attention to Lan Wangji. “Zewu-jun is looking for you; I believe they are discussing departure plans.”

Lan Wangji hesitates, glancing between Wen Qing and Wei Wuxian before he stands, bowing to her. “Thank you, Wen-daifu.”

“Are you leaving?” A-Yuan asks, turning himself to face Lan Wangji.

Lan Wangji nods. “I must speak with my brother and uncle.”

A-Yuan glances up at Wei Wuxian, then back to Lan Wangji. “Are you coming back?”

“Mn,” Lan Wangji hums, the ghost of a smile appearing on his face.

“Baobei, let Hanguang-jun go.” Wei Wuxian gently pinches A-Yuan’s cheek. “I’m sure you’ll see him again before he leaves.”

“I promise, I will not leave without saying goodbye.” Lan Wangji is clearly answering the line of conversation, but he never takes his eyes from Wei Wuxian.

Shortly after Lan Wangji leaves, Wen Qing convinces Wei Wuxian to join her in the healers’ rooms. They spend the afternoon compiling notes and theories into bound form to be used in the future if needed. Signing his name under Wen Qing’s on a detailed medical reference that will forever be held in the Jiang library is surreal.

He’s so caught up in the wild idea of his manuscripts also being added to the collection that he misses Jiang Cheng’s entry.

“Jiang-zongzhu,” one of the healers greets with a bow. “We were just leaving for the night, did you need something?”

“No, thank you. I’m just looking for my wayward first disciple.”

The memory of a similar argument with Jiang Cheng washes the sense of accomplishment from Wei Wuxian. Something must show on his face, if the shift in Jiang Cheng’s expression is anything to go by. Across from him, Wen Qing sets her brush down.

“What the hell?” Jiang Cheng says when the door slides shut behind the healers, his fists are clenched tightly at his side. “Is this how you’re going to be every time we’re in the same room together?”

Wei Wuxian shakes his head, both to answer Jiang Cheng and clear his mind. “No, no. Of course not. It’s nothing you’ve done.”

“Yet.” Jiang Cheng snaps, sitting down heavily next to Wei Wuxian.

When she speaks Wen Qing’s voice is level and matter of fact. “Jiang-zongzhu, we’ve had this discussion. You will need to find patience in times like this.”

The room is silent for a moment before Jiang Cheng grumbles his understanding.

Wen Qing nods once, then excuses herself. “I’ll see you both tomorrow. Get some rest.”

Even after they are alone, Jiang Cheng remains quiet. Wei Wuxian barely restrains a sigh.

Dreading the conversation he knows must happen, Wei Wuxian begins straightening the pages fanned out in front of him.

Watching his hands he says, “In the future you are a renowned Sect Leader and the most dedicated uncle I’ve ever met.” He chances a look and finds Jiang Cheng’s attention squarely on him. “There isn’t a single person capable of stopping you from ensuring everyone under your protection is well taken care of. Yunmeng wants for nothing. You are respected across the lands and your fierce fighting history ensures your words are heeded by disciples and commoners alike.” He smiles still so proud of his brother despite the chasm that grew between them.

“And the two of us?” Jiang Cheng asks, cutting to the heart of the matter.

Wei Wuxian hesitates as he pulls his arms off the table to lie on his thighs. “We usually only see each other a few times a year.”

“I suppose you’re too busy galavanting around or chasing after Lan Wangji to bother coming home,” Jiang Cheng snaps.

“When I first came back, you two couldn’t stand to be in the same room longer than necessary, but no, my time with Lan Wangji doesn’t stop me from visiting,” Wei Wuxian says, mostly confirming the sentiment.

Jiang Cheng's face shifts. "Then what, you came back and just decided to wash your hands of Yunmeng?"

Wei Wuxian takes a deep breath, his throat tightening with emotions. "You lived with the pain of grief and betrayal for so long that your anger toward me was too firmly set by the time Mo Xuanyu sacrificed himself to bring me back."

"When has my anger toward you ever stopped you from doing what you want?" Jiang Cheng interrupts, his voice rising at the end.

Wei Wuxian focuses on his hands, opening and closing them a few times before continuing. When he closes his eyes, the memories are bright in his mind. "When everyone returned to Lotus Pier after the second siege in the Burial Mounds, you stopped me and Lan Zhan at the steps to the Sword Hall... you were exceptionally clear that I was nothing more than a guest and any privileges I once enjoyed were long gone and it was not open for discussion."

"And what, you just complied? I find that hard to believe," Jiang Cheng scoffs.

"I did," Wei Wuxian says seriously. "When the leader of a powerful sect tells you something like that in front of an emergency conference full of other sect leaders it would be ill advised to assume it was said as anything but a sworn fact. When we parted, after the battle at the temple, we didn't talk for almost a year." They watch each other for a moment before Wei Wuxian continues, "The life we had, the life we have right now, wasn't an option any more and I didn't want to make our relationship any worse than it already was."

There's a long pause. Then, Jiang Cheng says, "Jiejie told me you're planning on leaving soon."

Wei Wuxian pulls the letter from where he'd tucked it close to his heart. "I received a letter from Baoshan Sanren. She invited me to her mountain; I can't pass up this opportunity."

Wei Wuxian makes a startled sound when Jiang Cheng snatches the letter from his hand, but doesn't reach for it, despite how badly he wants to. The table rattles under Jiang Cheng's hand when he slaps the letter down flat against its surface. He'd always planned on letting Jiang Cheng see the letter, but hadn't thought it would provoke this kind of reaction.

"So, you're just gonna run off again?"

"No, of course not!" Wei Wuxian answers, briefly startled by the intensity of Jiang Cheng's fury before the hurt in his eyes catches Wei Wuxian's attention.

Jiang Cheng's hand closes into a fist above the letter. "That's what you just said!"

Wei Wuxian looks Jiang Cheng in the eyes as he lays his hand on the top edge of the letter and pulls it out from under the other's fist. "I've been given an opportunity to meet with her and only a fool would pass that up. Jiang Cheng, my traveling somewhere doesn't mean I'm not coming back."

Wei Wuxian watches the muscle in Jiang Cheng's jaw as his brother works to choose his next words. In the end he says, "You're not going alone."

Wei Wuxian sits back and slips the letter out of sight. "Like I told Lan Wangji, I hardly expect this to be an open invitation for friends and family. It won't be a quick journey by any means, but the route is safer than most I've taken recently."

Jiang Cheng stands so abruptly his knee pops. "You're not going alone."

Wei Wuxian watches as Jiang Cheng turns and storms out of the library. When he doesn't return, Wei Wuxian slumps forward and sets his head on the table.

In the quiet he breathes through his emotions and tries to ignore the pull from his side, the stiffness in his shoulder, and the myriad of aches and pains that have long since settled in his joints and bones. He wishes he was only kidding about his body falling apart but with each breath he's reminded of the stark contrast between the body he'd been given by Mo Xuanyu and this one. With a deep exhale, Wei Wuxian sits up. Now isn't the time; he has a trip to plan.

Chapter End Notes

I thrive on kudos and comments (emojis are a valid form of communication!!)

if you want to yell at me, you can find me on [tumblr](#) and [twitter](#)

but I'm most active here and in a few servers on discord, like [Haven](#), which is a wonderful writing focused server, and [Danmei Destination](#) which is all things, well, Danmei lol

Family

Chapter Notes

It's a little later than normally posted but hopefully everyone will forgive me 💜

This piece is complete and will update Mondays and Thursdays

Big thanks to everyone who put up with me while I wrote this, your encouragement and assistance along the way mean the world to me. I couldn't have done it without you. And all the love in the world to [MsJulia](#) for making sure my love hate relationship with commas doesn't embarrass me and helped tweak a few areas to perfection.

Any errors are mine alone and are fixable, immediately, if pointed out!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Halfway to his rooms, Wei Wuxian hears the unmistakable squeal of a toddler followed by the breathy laugh of his nephew coming from his sister's room. Unable to stop himself, he peeks through the open doors and finds Jin Zixuan sitting cross legged on the floor with Jin Ling balanced on one knee and A-Yuan kneeling on the other side. A-Yuan notices him first, jumping to his feet and racing across the room to throw himself against Wei Wuxian's leg.

The scene brings tears to the corners of Wei Wuxian's eyes but he blinks them away. "Hello little radish, are you learning anything fun?"

"Gufu is showing us his shiny butterflies!"

Wei Wuxian's heart climbs into his throat; across the room Jin Zixuan wears a concerned, yet sheepish expression. The tired lines marring the edges of his eyes hint at the grief immediately recognizable as the white robes he dons. "A-Li thought it would help him adjust to my presence. After she and Wen-daifu explained our connection to you, they let him decide how he wanted to address me."

"Have you been here long?" Wei Wuxian asks, laying his hand on A-Yuan's head.

Jin Zixuan shakes his head. "I only just arrived; I wanted to give A-Li an update."

"I didn't mean for it to happen," Wei Wuxian says, looking down at A-Yuan. "Honestly I figured I was going to end up back in the dungeon."

Jin Zixuan is quiet as he adjusts Jin Ling. "My father was... not a good man. He did not think the rules applied to him; he believed everything he wanted should belong to him no matter who the rightful owner was. Your seal was no exception. He saw a tool capable of commanding the dead and wanted it to secure his power." He pauses, tweeking Jin Ling's

nose, drawing a babble of excitement from him. “I do not blame you for his death, but I do believe the seal should not exist in this world.”

Wei Wuxian sighs, releasing the breath he hadn’t realized he was holding. “I can not express the full extent of my gratitude for your forgiveness. The last thing I want is animosity between us.” He releases A-Yuan so he can bow. “I promise as soon as I can safely dispose of the seal I will do so.”

“Xian-gege,” A-Yuan says with a light tug on his outer robe. When Wei Wuxian turns his attention to him he says, “Is it safe?”

Wei Wuxian quickly glances at Jin Zixuan—who shrugs but gives a sympathetic look—then kneels to A-Yuan’s level. “Is what safe, baobei?”

“Where you’re going.”

Wei Wuxian sinks the rest of the way to the floor. “I don’t know, Radish. I hope it will be.”

“I don’t want you to hurt any more.” A-Yuan snuffles and Wei Wuxian’s heart breaks.

“Oh, A-Yuan,” he says, wrapping his arms around him so he can hold him securely as he rises and moves out of the doorway before settling on a cushion across from Jin Zixuan. “My hope,” he starts looking up at Jin Zixuan to let him know he isn’t speaking only to A-Yuan, “is for this little adventure to only take a season or two.” He rearranges A-Yuan so he’s facing Jin Zixuan, who tentatively passes Jin Ling to Wei Wuxian. He fusses for only a heartbeat before settling, his big eyes focused on Wei Wuxian, who can only smile. “If I have a choice, I don’t want to miss this any more than I absolutely have to.”

The sun has fully set by the time Wei Wuxian makes it to his rooms. He’s exhausted and sore and wants nothing more than to sleep. As he pulls the tie to remove his zhongyi there’s a soft knock at his door. It’s shameless, but he’s pretty sure he knows who it is and he’s beyond caring, so he leaves the shirt loose.

“Ah, Lan Zhan,” he says, his suspicions confirmed when he opens the door. He steps out of the way. Lan Zhan doesn’t say anything, simply stepping inside so Wei Wuxian can slide the door shut again.

Wei Wuxian knows he’s a sight to behold; even with the bandages wrapped around his torso and over his shoulder there’s still plenty of bruises and scars to see. For a handful of heartbeats he wonders if he should be nervous but quickly dismisses the thought. This is Lan Wangji. Even without the time they shared in the future, they have survived a war together. He knows Lan Wangji won’t judge him and, as if to prove his point, he watches Lan Wangji’s eyes track across each blemish and scar before settling on his face again.

“I would say it doesn’t hurt, but that would be a lie,” Wei Wuxian says wryly.

“Is there anything Wen-daifu can do to make you more comfortable?” Lan Wangji asks before making a sound in the back of his throat when Wei Wuxian shakes his head no. “Is there anything I can do to help? You said healing cultivation wouldn’t work; are you so certain?”

Wei Wuxian thinks about it for a second. “None of the attempts Wen Qing and I conducted have shown any changes in healing time, although our efforts could have been hindered by the resentful energy and more recently the curse. We haven’t tried anything since it was broken. I suppose it wouldn’t hurt to try.”

Lan Wangji follows Wei Wuxian to the table, but gently grabs him by the elbow before he can sit. “You should be comfortable.”

Wei Wuxian can’t help but be a little confused. “These are comfortable,” he says, motioning to the cushions.

“No,” Lan Wangji says, holding Wei Wuxian still. “Sitting so low could aggravate your wounds when you stand.”

Wei Wuxian smiles. He can see the slight lift to Lan Wangji’s jaw, the way he’s holding himself extra still, and the careful way he’s looking Wei Wuxian directly in the eyes. He wants to pinch Lan Wangji’s cheeks. Or cry, maybe, at the startling difference between this young man and the man he’ll become years from now. Wei Wuxian wants to tease him but is suddenly terrified of scaring him off, or worse, angering him.

Their time together in the Gusu Library comes to him and the memories feel like they belong to yet another life, just one more thing that happened to someone else. His chest tightens at the thought. So many things feel disconnected; he wonders if everything will settle down or if he’ll feel this way until he drinks Meng Po’s tea.

The warmth of Lan Wangji’s hand on his cheek startles him from his rumination. He closes his eyes, blocking out the worry radiating from Lan Wangji’s expression. “I’m sorry,” he whispers, leaning into the touch. “I don’t think I’m capable of not worrying you.” After a deep breath he continues, “Did you want to sit on the bed? There’s enough room for the both of us.”

The tips of Lan Wangji’s ears tinge red and Wei Wuxian can’t help but laugh. “Ai-ya, Lan Zhan, you can’t have it both ways. Here, sit, sit.” He plants himself on the nearest cushion, pulling Lan Wangji off center enough that he follows to one of the cushions next to him. “Do you want to start with my shoulder since it’s the least scandalous?” Wei Wuxian asks, unable to keep the teasing tone from his voice.

“Wei Ying,” Lan Wangji says and Wei Wuxian laughs again.

“It was also the last to be bandaged so it’ll be the easiest to get to,” he adds reaching up to work at the seam where Wen Qing fixed the ends together.

“Let me,” Lan Wangji says, reaching up to take over. He doesn’t make a sound when the bandage is off but the iciness in his gaze is enough to indicate his thoughts.

“He was only doing what he thought was best.” Wei Wuxian waits for Lan Wangji to look up before continuing. “This mad man, accused of trying to kill a contingent of cultivators, had just locked the Sect leader and the current heir apparent behind a wall of resentment. They were only doing what they had been trained to do. You can’t be mad at them for that.”

“I think we should start with direct application,” Lan Wangji says, diverting the conversation and pulling a smile from Wei Wuxian. He loves his stubborn husband so much.

A few later Wei Wuxian shakes his head and reaches across to pull Lan Wangji’s hand from his shoulder. “I can feel the warmth of the healing but I’m not feeling any change internally.” He squeezes Lan Wangji’s hand when he starts to protest. “We’ll have Wen Qing check it in the morning, there’s no reason for you to exert yourself for something that isn’t showing progress.”

“Trying to help you is neither a waste of time nor resources,” Lan Wangji protests, but he doesn’t pull his hand free so Wei Wuxian counts it as a win.

“Fine, fine,” Wei Wuxian says. He can’t help but remember another time they’ve had this conversation. He wishes he had the freedom to show the affection bursting from his heart.

After a moment Lan Wangji squeezes his hand and pulls away gently. “It is late, you should be resting.”

“Thank you for trying,” Wei Wuxian says with a gentle shake of his head. “Maybe we can repeat the experiment with a merchant or a villager to see if it’s just me it doesn’t work on or if healing through cultivation is only limited to cultivators.”

Lan Wangji doesn’t answer; instead he offers his hand after standing. “Once Wei Ying is well, we can revisit attempts to help others.”

Wei Wuxian can’t help it, he laughs. “Okay, Lan Zhan,” he says, taking the offered hand and pulling himself to his feet.

Wei Wuxian ignores the way Lan Wangji hovers until Wei Wuxian has shuffled around gathering his night clothes. It’s awkward in a way they’ve never really been and he has very mixed emotions about the whole situation.

He motions toward his privacy screen. “I’m just going to change.”

When he steps back into the room, the sight of Suibian, carefully returned to its holder, catches him by surprise. In his mind, the scene overlays with a memory from shortly after he’d returned; Lan Wangji had looked sad that time too.

“Did you want to talk?” he asks.

Lan Wangji shakes his head, then turns to face Wei Wuxian head on. “I can not under a clear conscience keep your sword. I know what you said, but you were in distress and I thought we could discuss it again once you felt better.”

It's been so long since Wei Wuxian has seen Lan Wangji as anything other than confident and sure of himself and his decisions, and the way he draws into himself is new and makes Wei Wuxian's heart ache. He can imagine the argument that would have transpired had this played out in his first life; he kind of wishes it had. At least then he knows his possessions would have been safe once he died. He crosses the room to stand side by side with Lan Wangji.

Lan Wangji watches him—waiting, like always—as he traces Suibian's sheath. “In the future I wielded Suibian as often as I could. At first it was just to practice.” Wei Wuxian gently lifts his sword, unsheathing it enough that the inscription on the blade is visible. “The praise for my efforts was loud enough to drown out most of my doubt, but the worry and self criticism quickly became too much.

“So I worked longer and harder, until each movement morphed into a way to build myself back up to a level I felt would be seen as respectful for the spouse of someone as auspicious as the magnificent Hanguang-jun. I worked myself to exhaustion, then pushed myself further still.” He slides the blade home and settles it back on its stand. “We fought, once you figured out why I was working so hard. You didn't care that I was doing it to better myself. You even said you understood. That you had done the same after...” Wei Wuxian snaps his mouth closed and shakes his head when Lan Wangji softly says his name. “It doesn't matter now. Did you want to stay for a while?”

His heart warms when Lan Wangji follows him across the room, and, to his surprise, only hesitates to give Wei Wuxian time to get settled on the bed before sitting on the edge himself. Once Wei Wuxian is comfortable he watches as Lan Wangji shifts, positioning himself a little closer but still sitting properly, with both feet on the floor—a juxtaposition to Wei Wuxian's lounging, cross-legged style at the head of the bed.

They sit in what Wei Wuxian hopes is comfortable silence for a bit longer before Lan Wangji sits up impossibly straighter, squares his shoulders, then, in another surprising move, twists so he is facing Wei Wuxian with one foot tucked under the leg still on the floor.

Lan Wangji glances away, his eyes cast somewhere between themselves and the sword stand. When he begins to speak, he doesn't immediately look back to Wei Wuxian. “I want to believe you are the Wei Ying from here, from now. I have no reason to doubt you, and I would never treat you unfairly if you weren't, but I need to know for sure to help settle my mind.”

Wei Wuxian wants to run his thumb up the bridge of Lan Wangji's nose, smooth away the worry that's collected like fine dust between his brows. He doesn't. Instead he smiles, patient like someone not terrified of losing it all, and says, softly, “Ask me anything, Lan Zhan, and I'll answer truthfully no matter what the question.”

With the slightest of nods Lan Wangji takes a deep breath and says, “Tell me three things from your past that only the Wei Ying from here would know.”

Wei Wuxian's heart skips a beat. It wasn't what he was expecting, but it makes absolute sense. “So smart, my Lan Zhan, to check if my past matches up with yours.” He pauses to consider the early moments shared only by them. Outside of the war, there have been few moments not marred by pain or misunderstanding.

Lan Wangji lets him sit for a moment then adds, "It does not have to be something monumental, as long as it is something I will know to have transpired or something known to be fact."

Wei Wuxian nods and decides to begin somewhere safe. "After my scuffle with Jin Zixuan, just before I was expelled from lessons, you caught me drilling in an ant hole with a stick. Jiang Cheng swore you hated me." He pauses, really thinking back on the event. "For the longest time I thought it was true."

Lan Wangji watches him. "You were meant to be kneeling in atonement. How were you meant to learn when you played at all times?"

Wei Wuxian shrugs with his uninjured shoulder. "I was naive; I didn't consider what I did to be wrong." The dismissal obviously catches Lan Wangji off guard so Wei Wuxian continues, "Jin Zixuan had spoken ill of Jiang Yanli in regards to her worthiness as his future wife. I was simply defending her honor while also keeping the sect heir from doing the exact same thing."

Lan Wangji watches Wei Wuxian, clearly on the edge of speech. But he holds his tongue for the moment, and instead says, "Tell me another thing."

Wei Wuxian thinks, running through his options before saying, "In the cave, before we fought Xuanwu, you were upset with my flirtatious habits and the way I'd thrown myself in front of the Wen brand. You asked why you were 'having such a useless conversation' and without hesitation I said 'If you don't have useless conversations with me, then who will you have them with?'" Wei Wuxian pauses, a sad smile on his face as he pushes his sleeve up. "You bit me," he adds, rubbing his thumb across the crescent scar near the crease of his elbow. "My core was so busy fighting off the fever and healing the brand mark, this little relic hadn't healed fully before Lotus Pier fell."

Quiet falls around them but it's second to the memories he suddenly finds himself lost in. Those first terrifying days in the Burial Mounds come back to him, sharp, and twisting. He'd nearly forgotten the way he would worry at the fresh scar, using the pain to convince himself he was capable of surviving. Or more importantly, to remind himself that no matter how the ghosts would imitate Lan Wangji, the only harm he'd ever caused was there on his arm.

"...Ying. ... Wei Ying?"

Wei Wuxian shakes his head, dispelling the thoughts and forcing away the images too dark to dwell on and putting on a smile instead. It doesn't last—he sobers when he sees the look settled on Lan Wangji's face.

"I did not know it had scarred," Lan Wangji says with such resigned self loathing that even a stranger would recognize it.

Reaching out, Wei Wuxian gently grabs Lan Wangji's forearm, thumb swiping across the crease of his elbow. "You were in pain and had just suffered a tragedy greater than any other person present at the time. Your actions were forgiven before we fought Xuanwu." Wei Wuxian pauses, earning a non committal sound from Lan Wangji. "This scar," he continues,

squeezing Lan Wangji's arm enough that he looks up, "was a grounding point for me when there was no other light to be seen. This scar reminded me that there were living people beyond the all encompassing pain and screams of the dead. And in my darkest moments it reminded me that the ghosts were liars and nothing they spoke could be believed."

Lan Wangji looks away. Wei Wuxian lets him, dragging in a lung full of air to calm himself.

"You wrote us a song," he whispers after a moment, then hums the opening chords. When Lan Wangji doesn't speak, he presses on. "In the quiet of your home, you played it for no one but yourself until we were trapped in the cave. When I asked, you sang to me, and as I succumbed to the raging fever my subconscious held so tight to the melody that it was never far from my heart. When I brought the Wens to the Burial Mounds, it was the first thing I played to A-Yuan when he couldn't sleep." Wei Wuxian stops, his heart racing like a rabbit's, so strong he knows Lan Wangji can feel it where they touch. "Thirteen years later it was that same song that gave me away on Dafan Mountain. Your song kept me comfortable in my last days and brought us together in my first days back."

There's a tremor, from him or Lan Wangji Wei Wuxian isn't sure, and across from him Lan Wangji has his eyes closed. Unwilling to push, Wei Wuxian moves his hand until he can thread his fingers through Lan Wangji's, then leans forward to rest his head on their hands.

"What will happen if you seek out Baoshan Sanren?" Lan Wangji asks a few minutes later.

Wei Wuxian doesn't rise. "I don't know. If rumors are to be believed, I'll be the first invited guest in known memory." He breathes in, then continues, "My mother was the first to descend in known memory so it only seems right that she ask me up."

"Will you come back?"

"Of course. I have no reason to believe she'd make me stay," he starts, then amends, "I mean, I'm sure she probably can, but I would hope she wouldn't resort to force."

"What if you decide to stay?"

Wei Wuxian imagines a life on Baoshan Sanren's mountain, secluded from everyone else. Even in theory it feels like an unfulfilled life. Who would give up the opportunity to live a life filled with a beauty that refuses to be overshadowed by the horrors this plane of existence is capable of offering? His experience of those horrors only makes the light of possibility brighter.

Wei Wuxian thinks of standing witness to the betterment of society. Of relishing in the joy of watching the children grow up, happy and healthy and loved beyond their wildest dreams. He imagines spending years with the love of his life. Lan Wangji's free hand strokes down his back and Wei Wuxian startles then realizes he's crying.

"It would take a monumental decree to keep me from the opportunities I've been given," he finally says.

The next morning dawns with pain and a new warmth radiating from the gash on his side. His shoulder shows no improvement and it takes everything in Wei Wuxian's being to not resent this body. When the battery of tests he and Wen Qing work through prove nothing helpful for his side either, they apply a poultice and bandage the area.

Wei Wuxian reluctantly agrees to limit his movement for the day, spending some time drafting a list of supplies needed for the trip. Before the first request can be filled Jiang Cheng slides the door open with only a single knock, not waiting for a reply.

"You're already packing?" he asks, in lieu of a greeting.

"Good morning, A-Cheng," Wei Wuxian responds, not looking up from the list he's finalizing. "I'm just gathering supplies."

"You're not healed enough for long distance travel."

Wei Wuxian continues writing. "I'm aware."

"Damn it, Wei Wuxian!" Jiang Cheng barks sitting heavily across from him at the table. "You need to think about your safety first. What if this infection spreads?"

"What infection?" Wei Wuxian asks, suspicion and delight equally thick in his voice as he lays his brush down and looks up.

"Whatever your side is doing today." Jiang Cheng waves his hand dismissively.

Wei Wuxian watches his brother for a moment then leans back, a smile spreading across his face. "Do you take meals together while she gives you updates?"

Jiang Cheng bristles, his neck reddening around his collar. "Don't change the subject. You aren't healthy enough to travel."

"A-Cheng!" Wei Wuxian laughs, delight. "Have you found someone to bond with over my misery?"

"This isn't funny, I'm trying to have a serious conversation with you!"

Wei Wuxian sits up straight again, sobering as Jiang Cheng mirrors the action. "I know. I'm not trying to be difficult."

"You're always difficult. You deflect, and hide away, and you throw yourself in front of danger like no one will miss you when you're gone." Jiang Cheng says with a huff, not looking away. Unlike their usual arguments his ever present scowl is edged with worry instead of anger.

"I know now that I'll be missed. That I will always belong here." Wei Wuxian holds up a hand to stave off Jiang Cheng's protest. "But you can't expect me to pass up an opportunity like this. Think of the benefits of my going, the wealth of knowledge the Jiang will have access to once I come back."

“If you come back.”

“*When* I come back,” Wei Wuxian reiterates, catching Jiang Cheng’s eye to press his point.

A knock followed by a child’s laughter interrupts them. Before Wei Wuxian can say anything the door slides open and A-Yuan is across the room. He stops just shy of Wei Wuxian, glances over his shoulder for approval, then turns back to throw his arms open. “A-yi says this is the best way so we know we won’t hurt you.”

“Oh baobei, you could never hurt me,” Wei Wuxian says scooping him up in a tight hug then resettling until he’s sitting cross legged so he can perch A-Yuan on his leg.

Jiang Yanli, following A-Yuan into the room, sits beside him with a smile and moves Jing Ling so he is within reach of Wei Wuxian. “Have you taken into consideration the changes between altitudes? It’s been mild so far but Hanguang-jun says the snow started in the mountains a few weeks ago,” she asks, direct to the point as she watches Jiang Cheng pour her a cup of tea.

Wei Wuxian smiles. “I have. I sent a request to the seamstress for a few deep winter pieces. I told her there was no rush.”

They spend the morning in each other’s company, the trip unanimously moved to a conversation for later and when Wen Qing arrives to check on Wei Wuxian and A-Yuan she remains for lunch and beyond. The day, by all regards, is a quiet affair that leaves Wei Wuxian more calm than he’s been in days but exhausted by the time the table is being cleared of scribbles and writing practice.

Jiang Yanli saves him from saying anything by insisting he take a nap if he’s able. She gives him a kiss on one cheek and Jin Ling, whom he’d stolen from Jiang Cheng at the start of lunch, gives him a pat against his other. He captures the tiny hand and makes munchie noises until his nephew squeals; beside him A-Yuan giggles. Wei Wuxian passes Jin Ling back to Jiang Yanli and accepts her fond touch to his cheek when she stands. He watches her go, escorted by Jiang Cheng. They both glance back at the door, wearing expressions that couldn’t be further from similar. The love in his sister’s eyes would warm him if not for the suspicion set in his brother’s shoulders. Wei Wuxian smiles with a nod and as soon as they are out of sight he whisks A-Yuan into his arms.

“Baobei!” he exclaims, peppering kisses on his cheek until A-Yuan squeals with laughter. “What do you plan on doing this afternoon?” he asks when he finally relents. “Should we sit near the shallows and get our feet wet?”

“After a nap, perhaps,” Wen Qing says, stepping through the open door. She sets a tray on the table. “And only if you are rested enough.”

“I’m never rested enough,” Wei Wuxian answers, distracting A-Yuan who is squirming in his lap as he fights off Wei Wuxian’s attempts to tickle him one handed.

“Which isn’t helping.” She hands him a steaming cup, expectant. “I don’t think you should be traveling any time soon but the window for good weather is closing and I can’t imagine you’ll wait for spring.”

Wei Wuxian tilts his head, looking out the open door to the blue sky peeking between clouds. “Will you talk to him for me?” he asks, voice somber. “He won’t hear reason from me, but you...” He swallows, then adds, “I don’t want him mad at me. I don’t want him to think I’m abandoning him.”

A-Yuan pats his cheek and when Wei Wuxian looks down at him he says, “Don’t cry, I don’t like it when you’re sad.”

Wei Wuxian can do nothing but pull A-Yuan against him in the tightest hug he dares to give. When he finds his voice he whispers, “Don’t worry about me baobei, I’ll be fine, I promise.”

Wen Qing gives him a few minutes with A-Yuan, only interrupting them to pass elixirs to Wei Wuxian at even intervals. When the sleeping draught hits, Wei Wuxian shoots her a betrayed look but follows without argument as she leads him to bed.

She brushes the bangs from his eyes. “It’s for your own good. I won’t let you sleep through Hanguang-jun leaving, I promise.”

When Wei Wuxian blinks into awareness he’s on his side facing the wall, guqin music trickling into his ears. His throat is dry and his mouth is sticky from being asleep too long.

“Damn it,” he grumbles, groggy, sitting up and looking out the window as if it will give any answers besides the general time of day.

As the notes from the guqin fade, Wei Wuxian scoots around to face the other way. He has to swallow twice before he trusts his voice not to break. “Lan Zhan, how long was I out?”

“The remainder of the day and through the night. It is just after breakfast.” Lan Wangji answers as he crosses the room, pausing only to retrieve a warm cup of tea from the low table before handing it to Wei Wuxian.

Wei Wuxian drinks the offered tea, then passes the cup back. “Will you be leaving before lunch?”

Wei Wuxian watches as Lan Wangji’s refills the cup before passing it back; his movements—refined as always—leaves Wei Wuxian wanting. “I shouldn’t hold you up then. I’m sure everyone is already waiting on you.”

To Wei Wuxian’s surprise, Lan Wangji sits close enough that when he turns his leg is pressed against Wei Wuxian’s thigh.

“Xiongzhong is speaking with Chifeng-zun and Jiang Wanyin so there is a little time.”

They sit in comfortable silence while Wei Wuxian finishes his tea. The warmth from it and Lan Wangji pressed against him clears his mind.

“May I ask a question?” Lan Wangji asks, lifting the pot in an offer to fill Wei Wuxian’s empty cup.

“I’m finished for now,” Wei Wuxian says. “You can ask me anything, Lan Zhan.”

Lan Wangji is quiet for a moment, contemplative, like he’s weighing the importance of his question. “What happened after you died the first time?” he finally asks, taking Wei Wuxian’s hands in his.

Wei Wuxian’s heart seizes in his chest. He knows where this is going and hates it. “What do you mean?”

“I overheard uncle and Xiongzhong sharing concerns they had over comments you made concerning me.”

“Does it matter, now that it hasn’t happened?” Wei Wuxian tries.

Lan Wangji doesn’t move, his silence is answer enough.

Wei Wuxian takes a deep breath and exhales heavily. “During the original conference you whisked me away from the battlefield and hid us away in a cave. When the Lan came to collect us, you refused and in the end were forced to hand me over. Your refusal to concede earned you disciplinary actions once you returned to Gusu.”

Lan Wangji’s speculation is palpable. “That’s all?”

“Of course not Lan Zhan, but I’m trying to leave this place better than it was the first time and the warning I gave your brother and uncle did just that.” He reaches out and brushes some wayward strands of Lan Wangji’s hair over his shoulder. “Let me live with the horror of my first life alone, at least for now.”

Lan Wangji makes an unhappy noise low in his throat. “Have you not suffered alone long enough? Is it so hard to allow those who care for you to help lessen the burden?”

Wei Wuxian’s brow furrows. “That’s not fair and you know it. I have never been more open and honest than I am right now.” He pulls his hands free and leans away.

“I don’t mean to upset you, I only want to better understand.”

Wei Wuxian rubs the palm of one hand over the back of the other, his attention focused on the movement. “It is. It’s not. It’s complicated.” He sighs, rubbing his hands on his face. “There are opportunities that didn’t exist last time and if the cost of living happily with everyone now is living with some memories alone, then it’s a price I’ll gladly pay.”

“What could weigh as heavily as losing Jiang Yanli and Jin Zixuan?”

Wei Wuxian looks up, a sad smile spreading across his face. “Anything to do with you sits differently with me, and your discipline was life changing and had long reaching consequences. You overcame the worst of it but your relationship with the elders was changed and no length of time after I learned the truth could cool my fury. It’s been years and everyone knows not to bring it up, especially around me.”

Lan Wangji glances toward the door. “I have seen the aftermath of the GusLan Discipline Whip. Usually the cultivator is healed and well enough to return from seclusion within a month.”

Wei Wuxian falls back on the bed, his arms stretched out to either side. His head barely misses the far wall. “Why ask if you know?” he asks, exasperated.

Lan Wangji says nothing, still looking toward the door. After a moment he shifts to lean over Wei Wuxian, bracing his hand on the bed on the far side of Wei Wuxian’s body beside his waist. “I was curious. Uncle and Xiongzhong stopped talking as soon as they spotted me and I have never experienced a time where information was withheld from me.”

Wei Wuxian props himself up on his uninjured side. They’re so close; he can imagine that he feels Lan Wangji’s warmth. “Please just know that it was life changing and nobody involved was happy.”

Wei Wuxian watches Lan Wangji’s eyes track over him before settling on his face again. He can’t stop his heart from racing as Lan Wangji reaches out and lays his free hand against his cheek. Wei Wuxian’s eyes flutter closed when Lan Wangji swipes his thumb along his cheek bone.

“Will you kiss me?” he breathes fully expecting Lan Wangji to pull away. The gentlest press of lips against his forehead brings tears to Wei Wuxian’s eyes.

“I stole a kiss once. I will not steal another.”

“It’s not stealing if I ask.” Wei Wuxian’s heart races as Lan Wangji leans in, closing the last distance between them; Lan Wangji’s lips are just as he remembers.

The press is gentle, exploring, and brings enough joy flooding through Wei Wuxian he could keep warm through the winter.

He reaches around, pressing his palm between Lan Wangji’s shoulder blades and gasps, a sob tearing free from his chest.

Lan Wangji startles, pulling back. “Wei Ying?”

Wei Wuxian holds Lan Wangji in place, their lips brush when he says, “Ah, no, it’s ok. Come here.”

When Lan Wangji leans in again Wei Wuxian lowers himself to the bed so he can wrap his left arm over Lan Wangji’s shoulder. He can’t stop his fingers from flexing against the

smooth muscle or the slide of his right hand as it traces the unblemished rise and fall of Lan Wangji's spine.

When their lips are too tender to continue, Wei Wuxian rearranges himself against the headboard. It takes very little coaxing to move Lan Wangji further up so they can stretch out together, and when he settles it's with his head resting above Wei Wuxian's heart.

"Do you need to finish getting ready?" Wei Wuxian whispers.

Lan Wangji shakes his head no, the action rubbing his cheek against Wei Wuxian's chest.

"Always so prepared." Wei Wuxian says, then kisses just above Lan Wangji's headband—careful not to touch. Lan Wangji's hair is in a simple half up style that makes it easy for Wei Wuxian to run his fingers through the loose strands at the nape of his neck.

They stay in each other's embrace—silent sentinels as the sun rises higher—until they can no longer ignore the world outside.

When Wei Wuxian breaks the silence his voice is barely more than a whisper. "Someone is going to come looking for you."

"Uncle and Xiongzhong know where I am."

Wei Wuxian laughs, wholeheartedly, and twists to reverse their positions. "Lan Zhan! You call me shameless!"

Lan Wangji lifts his chin, stubborn as always despite the blush coloring the tips of his ears.

Wei Wuxian swoops down, nips the top edge of Lan Wangji's ear, then rises just enough to press their lips together again. When they part they're both breathless but smiling.

Wei Wuxian tries to sit up but finds himself trapped by Lan Wangji's arm around his waist. "Lan Zhan, you have to let me up so we can make ourselves presentable." He cups Lan Wangji's cheek in his palm, "Come on, for me? Lan-xiansheng needs no encouragement to dislike me. He usually can't stand me on the best of days and these have been anything but the best of days."

Wei Wuxian watches a series of micro-expressions flash across Lan Wangji's face.

"Whatever it is, you can ask." He says into the space between them. "I don't want there to be any doubts or secrets between us this time."

Wei Wuxian feels Lan Wangji's exhale, watches his shoulders curl around him ever so slightly, and can taste the hesitation building around them.

"Who do you see when you look at me?" He finally asks, his voice soft as a secret.

Wei Wuxian's heart seizes in his chest, his vision blurring as tears spring to his eyes, hot and fierce. He shifts, sitting up enough to swing his leg over Lan Wangji's waist before leaning

forward so he can take his face in both hands. He presses their foreheads together, the cloud medallion cool against his skin.

“Only you. My heart has only ever beat this way for you, Lan Zhan. In all my years you are the only one I ever want by my side.”

Wei Wuxian sits up, breath stuttering in his chest as he watches a tear slip down Lan Wangji's cheek, the moisture catching against his hand. “You are the crisp breeze carried across the water, refreshing in the summer heat. Your touch is the blazing sun scorching away the bite of winter's harsh grasp. You are the air in my lungs and the beauty beheld by my eyes every time the sun kisses a horizon. You are my world and without you there is only darkness, a sky with no stars to lead me home.”

Lan Wangji surges up, taking Wei Wuxian's face in his hands, kissing him breathless again.

The Lan contingency departs just before lunch with easily eaten travel snacks provided by Jiang Yanli tucked safely in pouches for each of them. Wei Wuxian has parked himself on the steps off to the side so he can be present but not strain himself by standing for too long. To his surprise Lan Xichen approaches just before they take to the sky.

“I want to thank you for your part in taking down another tyrant,” he says once Wei Wuxian is on his feet again. He glances at Lan Wangji who is listening to Lan Qiren. “I promise no harm will come to my brother. He has done nothing to warrant disciplinary actions.”

Wei Wuxian bows. “Thank you Zewu-jun.” When he straightens he glances at Lan Wangji too.

“Wangji would stay if you asked.”

“He would, but there are things we both need to do apart from each other before we can visit more often.”

“It is reassuring to know the feelings are mutual between the two of you.”

Wei Wuxian smiles. “I have spent more time looking his way than I have gazing at the stars.”

Lan Xichen hums, but says nothing else. They watch the gathered group for a moment more before he turns back to Wei Wuxian. “Until next we meet, Wei-gongzi.”

Wei Wuxian bows again. “Safe travels.”

Wei Wuxian smiles with a subtle nod when Lan Wangji turns his way as soon as Lan Qiren steps away.

“I'm surprised he hasn't asked to stay,” Jiang Cheng says as he crosses to Wei Wuxian.

“He has duties to return to.”

Jiang Cheng gives him a once over, suspicious, “How are you feeling this morning?”

“Like Little Apple kicked me in the side.” Jiang Cheng gives him the oddest look and it pulls a laugh from Wei Wuxian. “When I came back, I absconded with the Mo family’s donkey.” He shakes his head with a fond smile, remembering the ornery beast. “She was horrible, but loyal. She didn’t always take me where I wanted, but she always got me where I needed to go.”

Wei Wuxian pauses to wave goodbye as Lan Wangji mounts Bichen. Beside him Jiang Cheng waves, once, as the cultivators file out of the gates.

When the last of the Lans slips from view he turns his attention back to Wei Wuxian. “We need to talk.”

Wei Wuxian follows Jiang Cheng to a covered pier beyond his personal rooms. It’s peaceful and secluded and Wei Wuxian can easily remember half a dozen summers spent in the waters just beyond the railings.

Jiang Cheng removes his boots, rucking up his pants and top robes before settling with his feet just skimming the water. Wei Wuxian does the same. They both sit there quietly watching the water shift, it’s obvious Jiang Cheng is organizing his thoughts so Wei Wuxian gives him his space, enjoying the peace between them.

Finally he says, “What happens when you get back?”

“When I get back?” Wei Wuxian repeats.

“What happens when you get back?” Jiang Cheng says. “Are you just going to run off again? Leave me here alone with secondhand information I would have never asked for anyways?”

Wei Wuxian’s brow creases. “Speak clearly, Jiang Cheng. I’m not keeping up with your thought process.”

He huffs, drapping his arms on the lower railing then rests his chin on the back of his arms. “What are your plans once you return from the Mountain? Do you intend to stay in Lotus Pier, or will you flit off on some other grand adventure?”

Wei Wuxian watches his brother’s profile—Jiang Cheng hadn’t turned to look at him through the whole exchange, and he feels his heart tug. “I’ve been away from home long enough to know the only reason I’d leave again would be to take marital bows.”

Jiang Cheng shoots him a disgusted look then changes the topic. “Do you know exactly where you’re going?”

“I do.” Wei Wuxian says with a nod. “There is a river that feeds into a trade hub north of Hejian—northwest of PingZhou—that leads into the mountains. The entrance to Baoshan Sanren’s mountain will be there.”

“Can you show me on a map?”

“Of course.”

“Good. After lunch you can show me. Come on.”

Jiang Yanli joins them in the library after lunch. “Oh! There’s a main trade route that passes from Lanling to Qinghe then on to Hejian. If you want, you can ride with us to Koi Tower and we can get you supplied for the remainder of your journey.”

“If you don’t mind, I can spend a few days with Chifeng-zun and Nie Huaisang before my final push to the mountain,” Wei Wuxian says, rolling the map. This will move his plans forward dramatically but perhaps that’s for the best.

“Perfect, I’ll let A-Xuan know and I’ll add another ration to the list in the kitchens.”

She pats both men on their shoulders and is out the door before either can protest.

“I promise to write every evening between locations and send a final message when I leave the inn for the mountain.”

“You’d better,” Jiang Cheng snaps. “And don’t do anything stupid along the way.”

“I’ll keep to the route and not engage in any hunts along the way.”

“Good.”

As they’re leaving the library Wei Wuxian asks, “Is there anything I can help with?”

Jiang Cheng gives Wei Wuxian a once over, which Wei Wuxian chooses to ignore. “I’m not an invalid. Besides, I’m going stir crazy all cooped up in my room alone.”

“Who said you were an invalid, no one said you were an invalid,” Jiang Cheng grouches.

“Well come on then, I’d like to share some training plan ideas before I leave.”

Jiang Yanli joins them a little while later with Jin Ling and A-Yuan in tow. A-Yuan settles on the floor next to Wei Wuxian, watching as he finishes a sketch.

“What is he doing?” he asks, leaning over the image.

“It’s one of the forms utilized in the Jiang training routine,” Wei Wuxian explains. “It’s a transition move that gives the cultivator a chance to get inside the defense of whatever he’s fighting.”

Yanli laughs at the look of wonder on A-Yuan’s face, the sound soft but bright. “A-Xian, such big words.”

“He’ll understand one day,” Wei Wuxian protests.

“Would you like to see the move in action?” Jiang Cheng asks, drawing everyone's attention to him.

A-Yuan glances at Wei Wuxian, and when he receives a nod of approval says, “Yes, please.”

“Come outside where there's more room.” Jiang Cheng crosses to the door with everyone in tow.

To A-Yuan's delight Jiang Cheng not only demonstrates the initial move but he then shows the move mixed with the surrounding forms he and Wei Wuxian had been discussing; his movements are slow, controlled, and then lightning quick.

He works through the sequence again at speed then turns to Wei Wuxian. “I see what you mean about quickening the advance.”

From his spot between Jiang Yanli and Wei Wuxian, A-Yuan bounces on his toes. “Shushu, show me?”

Wei Wuxian's head snaps to A-Yuan, then to Jiang Yanli who has the most believable look of innocence on her face that he's ever seen. Before he can say anything to his sister Jiang Cheng has secured his sword and is kneeling beside A-Yuan.

“If you really want, I can show you the stances now,” he says, bracing his palms on his thighs. “Once you get those down we'll get you a practice sword to train with the other disciples.”

A-Yuan lights up, his attention jumping to Wei Wuxian. “Will you come watch, Xian-gege?”

“Of course, baobei. I wouldn't miss it.”

Everyone relocates to the practice field where Jiang Cheng and Wei Wuxian slowly guide A-Yuan through the forms late into the afternoon.

Dinner is taken in the communal area with all the Wens present. It's the first time Wei Wuxian has seen most of them since they've moved and seeing each of them thriving leaves Wei Wuxian emotional. A-Yuan's excitement is unparalleled as he tells and retells his adventures from the day.

Exhaustion eventually overtakes his tiny frame and before he succumbs he climbs into Wei Wuxian's lap and drapes himself over his chest and shoulder. Wei Wuxian breathes through the desire to cry, made harder when he makes eye contact with Jiang Yanli who's sitting across from him cradling Jin Ling in a similar manner. Her smile is indulgent and all Wei Wuxian can do is duck down to kiss the crown of A-Yuan's head.

Wei Wuxian excuses himself and takes A-Yuan back with him to his rooms, tucking the toddler in before turning his attention to removing his dressings. Wen Qing arrives after he's had time to wash up, knocking as he's tying his zhongku.

Once the poultice and bandages have been reapplied she asks, “Do you want me to take him?”

Wei Wuxian lets his eyes drift to the sleeping child. “Nah, I’ll seal the room so he can’t wander outside.”

Wen Qing watches A-Yuan for a moment also. “How does he address you, in the future?”

“At first it was very formal; he didn’t remember me very well after the fever that wrecked his tiny body when Burial Mounds fell. But later, in private he called me Baba.”

She turns her attention on him, watching him for a minute. “How are you doing, Wei Wuxian?”

Wei Wuxian tries on a smile, but it sits wrong so he lets it fall. “I have nightmares almost every night which leave irrational things to sit heavy on my heart after I wake up.” He rotates his shoulder, feeling the muscles shift and move. “I’m terrified of messing everything up. The future wasn’t perfect but it was nice enough for the younger generation.”

Wen Qing motions to the low table. “What specifically do you think you alone would be able to do to thoroughly disrupt the general setting from your future?” she asks after they both sit.

Wei Wuxian opens his mouth, sighs, then says, “I know the information and changes I’ve already introduced will make it better, and I can’t imagine a future with Shijie alive and well being anything but blissful. So realistically the only thing I could do to ruin my future is not make it there.”

Wen Qing hums. “Lianfang-zun played an important background role in the way the camps were run, what do you think his punishment will be?”

“I don’t have the authority to make that call and if pressed I don’t think he’d get more than a slap on the wrist and a stern warning to do better. I do think, however, at his core he only ever wanted to be accepted by his father, which was never going to happen with Jin Guangshan. I hope that by bringing him into the fold now we can redirect his ambitions for a more useful purpose. However, knowing his capabilities means being cautious, so the morning I leave Lanling I plan to send a letter requesting Zewu-jun meet me in Qinghe so I can speak to him and Chifeng-zun about the concerns I have in regards to Lianfang-zun.”

“Do you think Chifeng-zun will forgive him knowing Lianfang-zun was the cause of his death in the other world?”

Wei Wuxian traces the grain of the table. “Most likely not. From what I know of Chifeng-zun the knowledge isn’t going to help their relationship. When Zewu-jun would speak of his sworn brothers he implied there was a level of animosity between them that had left them little more than acquaintances since the middle of the war. Zewu-jun initiated most of their interactions that weren’t explicitly sect related.”

“So his punishment is that he will never have the power he once wielded and his sworn brothers will forever be suspicious of him.” Wen Qing says, and she makes another thoughtful hum when Wei Wuxian nods in agreement. “I suppose someone knowing his capabilities and paying attention to his actions will have to be enough.”

“It’s better than him running loose trying to impress a megalomaniac bent on world domination.”

Wen Qing nods once as she stands to leave. “Indeed. Get some rest, Wei Wuxian.”

Chapter End Notes

I thrive on kudos and comments (emojis are a valid form of communication!!)

if you want to yell at me, you can find me on [tumblr](#) and [twitter](#)

but I'm most active here and in a few servers on discord, like [Haven](#), which is a wonderful writing focused server, and [Danmei Destination](#) which is all things, well, Danmei lol

Allies

Chapter Notes

This piece is complete and will update Mondays and Thursdays

Big thanks to everyone who put up with me while I wrote this, your encouragement and assistance along the way mean the world to me. I couldn't have done it without you. And all the love in the world to [MsJulia](#) for making sure my love hate relationship with commas doesn't embarrass me and who helped tweak a few areas into perfection.

Any errors are mine alone and are fixable, immediately, if pointed out!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

A-Yuan wakes all at once, having slept through the noise of Wei Wuxian's overnight packing. Wei Wuxian smiles as he strokes his cheek. "Good morning Radish, we have to get dressed so I'm ready when it's time to leave with your Guma after breakfast."

"Do you have to go?" A-Yuan asks sleepily, rubbing his eyes.

"I do," Wei Wuxian confirms. "If I leave with them now, it means I'll be able to get where I'm going quicker and that means I'll hopefully get back to you sooner."

A-Yuan scrambles up. "I'll miss you," he says, launching himself at Wei Wuxian and locking his arms around his ribs.

Wei Wuxian maneuvers him until he's holding on around his neck. "I know baobei, I'll miss you too." He holds still, letting his son cling tighter. It's an exhilarating feeling.

With a little effort Wei Wuxian gets to his feet and makes his way to the wash basin. "Come on radish," he says. "Let's get you clean and find something for us to wear, okay?"

A-Yuan nods without loosening his grip. "Can I dress like you today?" he asks, his face still pressed to Wei Wuxian's neck.

"Let's see what I can do."

By the time they're finished the colors of their outfits complement each other in an undeniable way. As Wei Wuxian watches A-Yuan spin, the heavier material fluttering around his legs, he chooses—just as he did when he'd first noticed them—not to think of the sheer joy brought by his son's clothes being put away with his own.

“Was this yours when you were my age?” A-Yuan asks, eyes bright when he stops to face Wei Wuxian.

“Nope, these are all yours.”

Breakfast is a lively ordeal, filled with quiet bustling while last minute plans are finalized. After A-Yuan wanders off to sit with Granny and Wen Ning, Wei Wuxian gets shooed back to the tables twice before he gives up and stays put. Yanli nudges her shoulder against his when he looks too long at the door.

“It’s ok A-Xian. I promise as long as you’ve marked your trunk they won’t leave anything.”

Wei Wuxian leans into the touch, shaking his head. “Everything I need fits into a qiankun pouch.” His sister, bless her, turns to him with alarm in her eyes. “It’s ok,” he reassures her. “I would have only needed two pouches if I’d’ve trekked out on foot.”

“I forget you’re used to traveling light,” she says with a sigh.

He nudges his shoulder against hers. “There’s nothing wrong with packing light so long as you know you have a home to come back to.”

They leave with little fanfare and for the first time since before Lotus Pier burned Wei Wuxian doesn’t feel like he’ll never see his home again. Yanli, as if sensing his mood, passes him a sleeping Jin Ling. It’s overwhelming and all he can do is hold his nephew closer.

Wei Wuxian indulges Jiang Yanli and rides the whole way in the carriage. He spends the day keeping Jin Ling happily occupied, telling him about his countless adventures atop Little Apple and later Suibian. It helps the time pass peacefully.

They find themselves in a tiny but well appointed village shortly before dusk. It’s here Wei Wuxian learns Jin Zixuan plans to rent out the entire inn for the night. Unable to resist, Wei Wuxian asks if he ever rented out the inns in Caiyi in the same manner during the Gusu Lectures. Jin Zixuan’s look of disbelief and subtle sputtering is answer enough.

The next morning Wei Wuxian finds himself stiff and more annoyed than he would like to admit after spending the whole thing tossing and turning, missing Lan Wangji’s warmth and steady heartbeat. At breakfast, Jiang Yanli takes one look at him and asks if there’s anything she can do to help. Wei Wuxian reassures her that he’d seen to his bandages and would take something for the pain once breakfast has had time to settle.

“I would have helped with the bandages if you had asked,” she says, guiding him to the table beside her.

He waves off the rest of her worry with a smile and shallow shrug of his shoulder. “None of that. You were preoccupied with getting your husband settled in and Jin Ling was being fussy.” She watches him for a moment so he makes grabby hands at Jin Ling, and is rewarded with an exasperated laugh and an armful of wiggling baby.

When their caravan gets underway again Wei Wuxian finds himself antsy and wanting to move. It's insatiable.

"Would you like me to ask them to stop so you can walk a while?" Jiang Yanli asks, the third time he looks out the window.

"What, no. That would slow us down... I can just slip out, we're not going too fast."

Jiang Yanli scoops Jin Ling from Wei Wuxian. "I do not approve of you jumping from moving objects."

Wei Wuxian reaches for the handle to steady himself, unable to stop the smile that forms at the concerned yet fond look on Jiang Yanli's face.

"A-Xian!" Jiang Yanli admonishes as he lets the door swing open, pulling him from the carriage.

His laughter when he doesn't so much as stumble is heartfelt and honest. "I'll be back in a little while."

It's just after midday when they hit the outer boundaries of the next town. Wei Wuxian lets his mind wander, imagining a life amongst the rolling fields and cozy farmhouses. The fantasy distracts him so thoroughly that it isn't until they reach the town center that he recognizes the village.

Wei Wuxian makes his way to the front of their group, locating Jin Zixuan and Luo Qingyang. "Are we stopping for the night or pressing on?"

"We could press on but staying the night would be better for everyone," Jin Zixuan answers.

"Meet me at the square, I'll arrange lodging and meals."

Being on foot gives him the freedom to peel off from the group when everyone turns to stable the horses and store the carriage. It only takes a few minutes to locate the inn on the south east side of the town.

When Wei Wuxian asks if they have any vacancies the young girl working the head of the house informs him that they are all but empty—it's past peak travel season and most of the merchants have long since gone home for the winter.

Wei Wuxian smiles. "I'd like to reserve every room you have available then and if you could let the kitchen know we'll be back for a meal in a little more than a ke."

She sputters a response but turns with a bow as Wei Wuxian bows to her and leaves. He finds Jin Zixuan holding Jin Ling while Jiang Yanli looks over a nearby merchant's table.

"I didn't know you knew this village." Jiang Yanli glances around then lets her gaze settle on Wei Wuxian.

“I’ve only ever been here once.” When she tilts her head, he continues, “The matron sheltered me when I fled Koi Tower. Her meal was the first true meal I’d had since...” He trails off with a shake of his head. “Her establishment is one of the best in town and her hospitality is above reproach.”

Jin Zixuan’s nod of approval means more than it should to Wei Wuxian.

Wei Wuxian leads everyone back to the inn, staying with Luo Qingyang as she speaks with the clerk while the others are led to the dining area. Movement at the far end of the hall catches his attention and he looks up in time to catch the eye of the matron. She nods once and it’s all Wei Wuxian needs to quickly excuse himself. He slips down the hall and into the room she was standing outside of. He bows and before he’s fully upright there are arms around him. It’s startling but her hitched breath is enough to relax him.

“Ah, A-yi, there’s no reason for your worry.”

It takes her a moment but she’s fully composed when she steps back. “There were so many rumors I couldn’t tell which were real. I held out hope, but then we heard about the conference and...” She shakes her head, at a loss. “Are you safe?” she asks, glancing suspiciously in the direction of the main dining area where the group has congregated.

Wei Wuxian can’t help the smile that pulls at his features. “I’m currently the honored guest of Jin shao furen.” He leans in conspiratorially. “She’s my sister, you know.”

The matron laughs, swatting his arm. “You were the one who brought all this work on me then!”

“I could think of no other way to show my gratitude for your assistance than to bring a bit of wealth and reputation to you and your establishment,” Wei Wuxian says with a bow.

She smiles when Wei Wuxian rises and he sees her hand twitch like she wants to reach out. “Your thanks and well being are more than enough. Would you like the same room you had before?”

Wei Wuxian pulls a face. “Would you find me paranoid if I said yes?”

“Not at all,” she says, and follows through with her earlier aborted movement to reach out and squeeze his arm.

Everyone takes dinner and after being bullied into sitting at the table with Luo Qingyang, Wei Wuxian finds himself pulled into a lively discussion with a handful of Jin cultivators. Laughter and liquor are abundant but Wei Wuxian refrains from drinking.

Their party is one of the last to disperse and when Wei Wuxian finally slips down the hall to his room he’s pleasantly distracted and thankful when sleep doesn’t fight him.

Wei Wuxian startles awake before the sun has a chance to color the edges of the sky. Knowing sleep is beyond him he dresses and gathers the few items that hadn’t been packed

the night before. He finds the matron prepping vegetables in the dining room and is eternally grateful when she simply passes him a knife to help chop.

Jiang Yanli joins him after breakfast, still in the back corner. They watch everyone come and go and when it's time to leave they hang back waiting until the matron has seen almost everyone else off.

From Wei Wuxian's side Jiang Yanli says. "Thank you so much for your hospitality. Your establishment will be the first we check if we find our way here again."

"This humble one thanks you," the matron says, clasping her hands together.

Jiang Yanli catches her clasped hands as she tries to bow, stopping her. "Please know if you are ever in need of anything do not hesitate to reach out to me or the Jiang Sect. We are forever indebted to you for the safety you gave our brother when he was in danger. Your courage in the face of great risk will not be forgotten."

"Shijie," Wei Wuxian hisses, more embarrassed than angry, glancing away from them both.

The matron turns her hands to grasp Jiang Yanli's as she straightens. "It is I who is indebted to your family. Wei Wuxian saved my son during an attack on the caravan he was a member of. As a mother you understand, don't you?"

Jiang Yanli smiles, a bright but somber thing. "I do. I would die for those I love."

"I'm going to take my leave," Wei Wuxian interrupts with a bow. He smiles, because it's expected of him, and gives his blessing before escaping past Jin Zixuan into the early morning.

As they pass he hears Jin Zixuan ask, "A-Li, is everything ok?"

"Of course."

Her response is the last thing Wei Wuxian hears before the slight chill in the air nips at his cheeks. He uses the discomfort as a grounding point.

Wei Wuxian quickly locates Luo Qingyang and tells her he's going to get a head start, taking off on foot in the direction of Koi Tower.

With each step he takes, Jiang Yanli's words repeat in his head and as hard as he tries he can't shake the image of her dying in Jiang Cheng's arms. He's past the city gates before he knows it, the trees growing denser around him. He can hear the river that brought him here and wonders if he has time to wander down to the banks, then reconsiders.

When the canopy above him tangles, blocking the morning sky, he stops, guilt crawling in his stomach. He'd left so suddenly with little explanation and the worry he knows he must have caused Jiang Yanli tastes like ash on his tongue.

His side, as if to punctuate his actions, burns from the quick pace and the weight of the rucksack he hadn't left with the caravan. Spotting a rock outcropping he makes his way over

to wait for everyone else.

He's had just enough time to doze off when he hears the tell-tale sounds of their group. Taking a deep breath he bounds off the rocks and heads back toward the city. The sooner he meets back up, the sooner he can apologize.

Luo Qingyang spots him first, nodding at him with a bright, "Did you miss us?"

"Of course I did. I doubt you missed me though," he answers, continuing past her. Her laughter lifts a bit of the weight from his shoulders.

With a practiced move he swings himself up on the carriage and slips in with little fuss. Jiang Yanli smiles but he doesn't miss the way she looks him over to ensure he's safe. "I'm fine," he starts but stops when she shakes her head.

"I want to apologize for upsetting you," she says, rearranging Jin Ling so she can lean forward to press her hand against Wei Wuxian's arm.

"Shijie, no. You didn't do anything wrong," he protests immediately.

"I should have chosen my words more carefully. I know your past, the horrors you've seen, and my choice of words obviously brought those memories to the forefront."

Wei Wuxian looks away. He can't stand to see the sadness in her eyes. "Don't be sad, Shijie. It wasn't your fault. Besides, it doesn't matter how horrible it was, none of that matters now. You are alive and safe."

She doesn't answer, simply squeezes a little tighter, then leans back.

They ride the rest of the way to Lanling in quiet conversation and intermittent periods of quiet when Jin Ling is napping. It's perfectly relaxing but Wei Wuxian can't quiet the growing anxiety vibrating through his body. He tries to ignore it the same way he tries to ignore the general pain that hasn't faded from earlier. It doesn't work. Both end up more unbearable than not before they hit the outskirts of the neighboring village and only gets worse the longer they travel.

When they clear the last big village before Koi Tower he begs his way out of the carriage, taking Jin Ling with him, swaddled close in a sling. Subconsciously he's aware that he's being clingy but his sister is indulging him and he can't see the harm in spending as much time with his nephew as he can.

Jin Ling only gets fussy once, but Wei Wuxian manages to calm him before having to resort to handing him back to Jaing Yanli. He smiles when he catches her checking on them with a fond smile.

"Do you want to give him back?"

“It’s only a few more li,” he says. “I’ll have to cover more than this on the next leg of the journey. Besides, if I survive this distance with an infant then you can confidently tell Jiang Cheng that I’m capable of making it on my own.”

“I do not doubt your capabilities, I just worry you’ll wear yourself out unnecessarily,” she sighs and it’s such a motherly move that Wei Wuxian almost caves and climbs back in with her.

“I’ll be okay,” he says with a wink. “I think I’ll go bother your husband now.”

Her laughter follows him.

Luo Qingyang leads their party through the gates of Koi Tower and it quickly becomes evident to Wei Wuxian that the place is changing. In the time since his mad dash over the wall the miasma around Koi Tower has shifted enough that even the resentful energy that once clung to the soil has begun to lift and clear away.

It’s refreshing.

Wei Wuxian inhales and exhales a few times in hopes of washing his nerves away.

Madam Jin and Jin Guangyao meet them at the bottom of the stairs. Madam Jin’s face has a stern set made sharper in contrast to Jin Guangyao’s polite smile. They both clock Wei Wuxian before the entourage is fully through the gates.

Wei Wuxian feels his stomach swoop as their eyes track him before sliding back to Jin Zixuan.

“Wei-gongzi,” Jin Guangyao greets with a bow just deep enough to be proper. “We had rooms prepared for you when we heard you would be joining us for a few days.”

Wei Wuxian smiles. “Thank you,” he says with a bow of his own. “I believe this will be the first time I’ve enjoyed the amenities of Koi Tower.”

Madam Jin’s eye roll is nearly audible before she turns her attention to Jin Zixuan/ “Well come on now, no need keeping your wife and son out in the elements. Wei Wuxian, Jin Guangyao will show you to your rooms.”

Wei Wuxian relinquishes Jin Ling to Jiang Yanli then watches as she and Jin Zixuan follow Madam Jin toward one of the far halls. When they disappear from view he turns back to retrieve his bag.

“Is that all you have?” Jin Guangyao asks when Wei Wuxian returns to his side. “This way then,” he says, leading them down the same hall Madam Jin had taken.

“Once you have freshened up a maid will lead you wherever you would like to go.”

Wei Wuxian takes a few moments to look around, pleasantly surprised his rooms are as well appointed as they are. The decorations and furniture are distinctly Jin and far outside his tastes but he applauds their commitment to the aesthetic. After a quick investigation he finds he has a sitting room that opens to a private terrace and a washroom.

A quick bath leaves him clean but no less anxious so he wards the doors and windows of his bedroom and settles on the bed to meditate. His sister arrives before he can fully settle his mind and he gladly accepts the distraction.

“I figured you wouldn’t mind a little company before dinner,” she says with a soft smile.

They end up sitting on the terrace, shoulders barely touching as they watch the colors shift across the sky. Jiang Yanli keeps up a one sided conversation, softly filling Wei Wuxian in on the changes that have already been made in Lanling and the ones that can now be made since Zixuan is back home.

“Mother seems less irritated.” Her attention is fixed on a cloud as it seems to absorb the colors of sunset. “A-Xuan says he noticed her change in attitude after the crypt was sealed. He said it was like watching a weight lift from her shoulders.” Jiang Yanli sighs. “I hope her change in attitude extends to A-Yao. He bore the brunt of her frustrations on more than one occasion.”

“Will you be safe?” Wei Wuxian asks, his eyes catching on a shadow in the far corner before moving to his sister. “I will stay if you do not believe you are safe here.”

She meets his look with a smile. “She has always doted on me, even more so since Jin Ling. The real question is whether you will be ok.”

Wei Wuxian wants to remind her that he usually survives both adventures and mis-adventures but the honest concern etched across his sister’s brow is enough to still his tongue. “I will take every precaution I can,” he says instead. “I have a family to return to now.”

Dinner is taken in the family wing. Wei Wuxian wonders if Jin Guangshan freely allowed Jin Guangyao at his table, or if this was another way he exerted power over the man.

They eat in silence and memories from his many meals in Cloud Recesses fill his mind. A wave of melancholy washes through him; he misses the way it was, which is stupid. He has a chance to make it better, to perhaps have their acceptance without as hard of a fight. He decides that no matter what happens everyone he holds dear will know how much their love now means to him.

When he looks up from his plate Jiang Yanli is openly looking at him with worry shining in her eyes. In his peripheral he sees Jin Guangyao shift ever so slightly, the new position small enough to not draw attention but allows for him to keep Wei Wuxian in his line of sight. Wei Wuxian knows he’ll have to deal with him head on at some point but he can’t decide if doing so earlier or later is the better choice. As such he simply smiles and takes another bite of rice.

As if the universe is conspiring against him, Jin Guangyao offers to walk Wei Wuxian back to his rooms, freeing Jiang Yanli to spend time with her mourning husband and mother. Wei

Wuxian thanks him, bows to the others, then motions toward the hall. They walk in silence most of the way there—Wei Wuxian with his hands clasped behind his back, Jin Guangyao as controlled as he ever was, is...

When they round the final corner Jin Guangyao says, “You should have everything you need for the night, if there is something missing a maid will be nearby to assist.”

Wei Wuxian decides any further conversation can wait until the next time they cross paths and bows. “Thank you, Lianfang-zun,” he says before shutting himself into his rooms.

As a show of faith, Wei Wuxian doesn’t ward the doors that lead to the hall or terrace. He doesn’t trust more than a handful of people within the walls of this gilded palace but he understands trust is supposed to go both ways and the easiest way for him to earn others’ trust is by showing he’s no longer a threat.

Predictably, he doesn’t get a lot of sleep. When every noise continues to rouse him from whatever light slumber he’s slipped into, he gives up and moves to the stocked writing desk in the corner. He writes Jiang Cheng to tell him about the trip to Lanling and Lan Wangji to ask that they meet in Qinghe with or without his brother. He writes a letter to Jiang Yanli thanking her for everything she’s done for him so far and gives his wishes for Jin Ling. He tries not to think about the finality of ascending the mountain. His mother came down, why shouldn’t he? Besides, if he doesn’t come back, what was all of this for?

After he composes himself again, he writes one letter to Nie Mingjue to announce his impending arrival and another to Nie Huaisang asking he gather any books concerning the saber curse and have them ready when he arrives. And since sleep has completely abandoned him he writes a short letter to Wen Qing. A few lines to update her on his progress and his health, and then, Stay safe and take care of our family. He signs it, Your brother, Wei Wuxian.

The sun is only just brightening the sky when there’s a knock at his door. He assumes it’s his sister so he rises from the lotus pose he’d settled into and quickly opens the door to find that his assumption was correct.

Jiang Yanli takes in his fresh robes and the dark circles he can practically feel under his eyes and simply wraps him in a tight hug. When she finally pulls back her eyes are bright but sad.

“I was hoping I could convince you to stay a few days but I think the weather is shifting so it might be best if I see you off today.”

He clings tighter, no words able to fully express his love and devotion to her.

They have a quiet breakfast, joined by Jin Zixuan. No one talks about the tremendous changes they’ve all been through or the terrible future he shared with them. Their abilities to adapt and overcome are immediately recognizable. They are still themselves but their eyes show more focus, more observation. He knows they’ll be alright.

“If you need anything,” Wei Wuxian says, speaking to both of them as he hands a small stack of parchment to his sister, “write your message on these and it should reach me no matter where I am.”

Jiang Yanli presses her palm to his cheek. “You’ve always been so bright. I can’t wait to see what you invent next.”

Wei Wuxian leans into the touch then steps away, back straight, before he bows to both of them. There are a thousand things he could say but he says none of them. Instead he smiles, big and bright and honest then turns away and begins the next part of his journey.

Having left the letters safely in Jiang Yanli’s hands, Wei Wuxian turns his worries to the road ahead. He sets a decent pace and is rewarded by reaching the first village his road passes through earlier than expected. His victory is tempered by his side and shoulder protesting the excursion but he ignores it to peruse the market looking for the few items he wasn’t able to acquire before leaving Lanling. He also searches for an apothecary in hopes of picking up some roots and herbs that can be brewed into his tea for pain relief.

He takes an early dinner in the sitting area outside one of the nicer establishments, choosing to distract himself by watching the vendors selling their wares. It’s nice, he thinks, to be mostly unrecognizable. He’s sure that not having his name and image dragged through the mud for over a decade has helped tremendously. The unassuming traveling robes in colors not his own are beneficial, also.

A flash of white crossing the gap at the end of the street catches his attention and he can’t help but berate himself for the zing of excitement that runs through him. There’s no reason for anyone from Gusu to be here, let alone Lan Wangji who would have received the letter at earliest sometime after lunch, if Jiang Yanli had sent it with a cultivator, making deliveries by swordflight—and she may not have done that. Wei Wuxian shakes his head and goes back to his food.

When his dishes are cleared he pulls a small journal and writing kit from his robes. Inside are ingredient lists and recipes for everything from medicines Wen Qing has instructed Wei Wuxian to take daily to procedures for emergency situations he might find himself in.

He’s lost in concentration, adding a new recipe he picked up at the apothecary, when he hears the most beautiful thing in the world.

“Wei Ying?”

It’s soft. Spoken like a question, an open invitation, offered with uncharacteristic hesitation. Wei Wuxian’s head snaps up, and his gaze fixes on the figure of white standing before him.

“Lan Zhan. What are you doing here?” Wei Wuxian breathes, astonishment coloring his voice.

Lan Wangji fidgets, the smallest movement as he straightens his sleeves—Wei Wuxian would have overlooked the motion when he was younger.

“Here, sit, sit.” Wei Wuxian scoots around the table a bit so both their backs can be toward the wall, bumping their shoulders together. “You have to be exhausted. What did you do, fly straight here? It would have been fine to wait a day.”

Lan Wangji is quiet for a moment too long, his response interrupted by an inquiring server. Wei Wuxian takes the opportunity to order a series of dishes he knows Lan Wangji enjoys and the house blend of tea that surprised him earlier.

When they are alone again Lan Wangji turns his attention fully on Wei Wuxian. "I should never have left. You have my unconditional support, but I can only provide that if I am with you." Lan Wangji pauses, looking away, and says, "I believed I had more time, despite experience to the contrary."

He looks young, but not helpless. Wei Wuxian loves him impossibly more.

Wei Wuxian catches sight of the server headed back their way and smiles. "We'll talk more once we're finished here."

When the dishes are arranged Lan Wangji asks, "Have you eaten?"

Wei Wuxian nods, opening his notebook again. "I finished shortly before you arrived." Lan Wangji nods in understanding. "Eat," Wei Wuxian says, reaching with the newly delivered chopsticks to move a nicely grilled vegetable from one dish to the bowl of rice. "We have the rest of our lives to talk."

They sit in companionable silence while Lan Wangji eats. Wei Wuxian shows him the notebook when he glances over but otherwise they simply exist beside one another. Wei Wuxian could cry. It had taken them nearly a year of marriage to finally settle into this kind of peace, and it's moments just like this that remind him of exactly how much time had been wasted or lost. They deserved better than missed time and here he is with the perfect opportunity to correct even that and what is he doing? Running off to some far away land.

Alone.

Again.

Lan Zhan's hand on his forearm startles him.

"Wei Ying?"

When Wei Wuxian meets his gaze. Lan Zhan's eyes glance quickly from Wei Wuxian to the table and back. Wei Wuxian follows and curses under his breath. Lan Zhan's fingers tighten, stopping him from using his sleeve to wipe the spreading ink spot from the brush he'd forgotten he was holding. Wei Wuxian intends to argue but Lan Wangji has already looked up and caught the attention of the server.

"May we use a rag?" he asks when the man arrives.

"Oh! It's no trouble." He pulls a rag from his apron and makes quick work of cleaning the mess.

"There's no need to ruin your sleeve," Lan Wangji says when they are alone.

Wei Wuxian turns his arm where it's still being held by Lan Wangji and slowly pulls until he can thread their fingers together. He has to breathe for a moment, his heart rate elevated by the look that flashes through Lan Wangji's eyes.

Wei Wuxian laughs when Lan Wangji lifts his chopsticks with his non-dominant hand to finish eating and goes back to his notebook.

The server arrives once the bowls are empty, taking a few silver pieces for his efficiency as Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian leave.

"Have you secured a room for the night?"

Wei Wuxian jostles their hands. "So forward."

A laugh bubbles out at the utterly unamused look Lan Wangji gives him. Wei Wuxian smiles as he leads them inside. "You're impossible. I wouldn't change you for the world."

His room is simple but comfortable and feels so much more welcome with Lan Wangji by his side. Of course before he can settle into the normalcy they are capable of, Lan Wangji steps away and turns his golden eyes on him.

Wei Wuxian waits. He gives Lan Wangji the attention he never tires of, taking in his blue travel robes and the slight roundness that hasn't fully melted from his face. "I forgot how young we really were," he whispers, because it's true.

Lan's Wangji jaw tenses at the observation and Wei Wuxian exhales. It isn't a sigh, never at Lan Wangji, but he has to center himself, prepare himself for whatever is about to come. Lan Wangji's face shifts at whatever he thinks Wei Wuxian is thinking, then he's surging forward to kiss him.

Wei Wuxian startles, spending a few heartbeats frozen until Lan Wangji pulls back which is simply inexcusable. Bless him, Wei Wuxian thinks, as he brings his hand to Lan Wangji's face—they're nearly the same height now and the knowledge zings through him pleasantly.

Wei Wuxian leans in and they're kissing again.

When they break for air Wei Wuxian finds himself smiling. "Your uncle is going to be furious at me." Lan Wangji tries to step back. "Wait, come here." Wei Wuxian presses his hand more firmly against Lan Wangji's face. He lets his voice fall to a whisper. "The only thing that matters is us." Wei Wuxian guides Lan Wangji's face to a slightly different angle, doing the same for himself until they fit together more easily. He goes slow, pours his love out into the universe.

Wei Wuxian misses the eternal comfort his husband represents. He has spent every moment since arriving wanting to hold Lan Wangji close and be reassured that the world wasn't falling in around them, around him, that it would all be ok. That they would be alright. That he would survive. He'd been terrified that it had all been a lie, that despite years of being told he'd always been loved, here in the face of their younger selves he would get only the anger and misunderstanding that had driven them apart last time. That fear had fueled his

confession. And even as he spoke he wondered if telling everyone his history was the right choice or just a selfish attempt to ensure the people he loved wouldn't reject him again.

Here, with Lan Wangji in his arms again, cannot feel sorry for any of the resulting complications.

"Wei Ying," Lan Wangji breathes, pulling away and breaking Wei Wuxian's spiral. "What's wrong?" Lan Wangji's fingers brush tears from his cheeks and Wei Wuxian can't find it in himself to be surprised.

"I killed a child that hadn't committed any of the cruelties he was capable of and potentially ruined the relationship of three very important men to ensure everyone I loved had a chance to live and when I look inside, I can't find a single grain of regret." He swallows thickly. "I have you here, now, looking at me like this, and I refuse to apologize for my actions." Lan Wangji's fingers twitch against his cheek and Wei Wuxian can't help but lean into the touch.

A look passes over Lan Wangji's face before it settles in a familiar stubborn set. "You have suffered alone long enough. Your honesty provided vital information that was necessary for the safety of family and allies. There is nothing to feel ashamed of or apologize for."

Wei Wuxian nods. It takes everything in him but he steps back breaking contact. They have time. He motions around them. "Make yourself at home."

Wei Wuxian settles at the low table, smiling when Lan Wangji sits across from him. "If you want, you can help me change my dressings before bed."

Lan Wangji nods. "Would you like me to play for you while you work?"

Wei Wuxian smiles. "I would never turn down your music, it always helps me concentrate."

Wei Wuxian turns his attention to mixing the salve and other medicines, letting the music comfort him after the preparations are finished.

When it's nearly bedtime he allows Lan Wangji to remove the dusty dressings and clean the wound with a warm washcloth. They secure the new bandages then separate to finish dressing for the night.

Wei Wuxian finishes first and hovers. It would be nothing for him to turn down the sheets and climb into bed, but he hesitates, waiting for Lan Wangji to finish.

Lan Wangji steps from behind the privacy screen a few moments later and Wei Wuxian discovers that he really doesn't stand a chance. He laughs and Lan Wangji's eyes snap to him, an edge of guarded hesitation clearly etched in the angle of his shoulders and the way he raises his chin the barest amount.

"I assure you I'm only laughing at my own demise." Wei Wuxian says and opens his arms. If it works for his husband, it should work for this younger version. "How am I supposed to survive knowing the things I know while also knowing nothing at all."

When Lan Wangji immediately steps forward Wei Wuxian revels in the joy of simple affections. He steps away only far enough that he can pull the covers back.

“Would you prefer the inside or outside?” he asks as he’s bundled into Lan Wangji’s arms again.

“Wherever Wei Ying does not want.”

Wei Wuxian turns in the circle of Lan Wangji’s arms. “I’ll take the far side, unless you want me on the outside so I’ll be easier to push off the bed.”

Lan Wangji doesn’t roll his eyes but Wei Wuxian can tell it’s a near thing. His exasperated “Wei Ying,” pulls a laugh from Wei Wuxian as he climbs to the far side and slides beneath the covers. Lan Wangji follows a moment later, settling in on his back—like he always does—until Wei Wuxian scoots next to him, then he reaches around to pull Wei Wuxian impossibly closer.

When Wei Wuxian wakes in the morning he still has his head resting on Lan Wangji’s chest. He can tell the other man is not asleep, his heart-rate far above the resting pace Wei Wuxian knows better than his own. He tries to pull away, but Lan Wangji’s arm tightens around him, holding him in place.

His voice is soft but weary, tinged with tiredness, when he speaks. “How are you feeling?”

Confusion mixed with the lethargy of sleep stills Wei Wuxian’s tongue. “I’m fine,” he finally says and has to clear his throat to continue. “Are you okay?”

Lan Wangji moves, turning so he can more easily face Wei Wuxian while still maintaining as much contact as possible. “It is okay to talk to me, Wei Ying.”

Wei Wuxian can’t be expected to function under such scrutiny this early in the morning. He contemplates snuggling in to distract Lan Wangji but he looks legitimately concerned so Wei Wuxian slides over so he can tuck his head against Lan Wangji’s shoulder. “They’re just night terrors. I’ve had them since the burning of Lotus Pier. They happen so frequently, I don’t even think about them anymore. I don’t remember them half the time. I should have remembered to tell you so it wouldn’t have startled you.”

They lay in silence long enough that Wei Wuxian begins to drift off again. He’s far enough gone that he nearly misses Lan Wangji speak, his voice coming as if from under water. “If there is something I can do to help, would you tell me?”

Wei Wuxian shakes himself awake, blinking up at Lan Wangji. “Simply being here helps more than you’ll ever know.”

Lan Wangji hums and even if Wei Wuxian hadn’t been looking he would have known the slight smile was there.

When they finally disentangle and dress themselves it is still early, the sun only just rising. They gather the few items they'd left out the night before and make their way to the dining area where they order food for now and later. They eat in comfortable silence, Wei Wuxian smiling like a fool each time he catches Lan Wangji looking his way.

The server, from dinner, brings their second order packed in waxed paper once they have finished breakfast. They give their thanks to him and their hosts, settling their bills, before heading on their way.

As the day progresses the landscape changes, becoming more rugged. When the sun peaks overhead Wei Wuxian slows. Lan Wangji notices immediately, stopping to check on Wei Wuxian.

The laugh is unintentional, and Wei Wuxian shakes his head as he makes his way off the path and into the trees so they cannot easily be seen. Lan Wangji follows, giving Wei Wuxian space.

A clearing comes into view and Wei Wuxian leads them in. "I want to pretend the trek isn't an issue but I'm not the same person I was during the war and I need to learn to accept my limits." He settles in the dying grass. "Take lunch with me and listen to a few of my nightmares?" he asks even as Lan Wangji is settling beside him, the pouch with the food already in hand.

"Do you have any pain relief medicine with you?" Lan Wangji asks. "Or is that just for tea?"

"The pain is manageable," Wei Wuxian says with a smile. "I'm used to it so mostly I can push it out of my mind." He takes the offered bundle of food and spends a little extra time unwrapping it before speaking again. "The exhaustion is going to be my downfall."

Lan Wangji still has his bundle in hand, undisturbed. "Then we will take our time arriving."

Wei Wuxian knocks their shoulders together. "As much as I would love to elope with you, the sooner I get there means the sooner I can move on and by default the sooner I can return to everyone."

Lan Wangji hums, his eyes focused on loosening the wrapping around his meal. Wei Wuxian does not point out the color creeping up the cuff of his ear.

After a moment Lan Wangji asks, "How do you suggest we overcome this issue?"

"You fly us in."

Lan Wangji immediately looks to Wei Wuxian. "You are not comfortable flying."

"Flying is okay," Wei Wuxian corrects, "or at least in the future I am better with it. Here, now..." He pauses as a shiver races up his spine. "Here I am too close to the events that terrified me and do not possess the ability to easily overcome the fear."

"I will not do something I know will cause you distress."

Wei Wuxian could kiss him. He sounds so like his adult self that it pulls a smile to Wei Wuxian's face.

"Eat, Lan Zhan, and I'll tell you about the first times I flew after I built my core up again." Wei Wuxian waits until Lan Wangji has started eating to begin, picking at his own food as he goes.

He describes the frustration of knowing how it's done but not being strong enough to take to the air. The terror and elation of soaring once again on Suibian. The lightness of his heart and body. The swoop and spike of anxiety when he banked or dove toward the ground.

"It took a while for my brain to reconnect excitement and joy to the movements. I cried the first night it all clicked back into place. It had been so long since I had been thrown from the Wen guard's sword. I had resigned myself to the fear that continued to simmer no matter what we did."

Wei Wuxian wraps the remainder of his lunch, ignoring the displeased noise Lan Wangji makes before taking the food and tucking it back inside his qiankun pouch with his empty wrapper.

They sit in silence for a moment before Lan Wangji says, "Did anyone know that in the future?"

Wei Wuxian shakes his head no. "I always assumed you knew though."

"I am glad you trust me enough to share."

His eyes are intense and Wei Wuxian wants to look away. Instead he leans into Lan Wangji's side. "I have always trusted you with my life, that has not changed. I only wish I would have understood what we both meant to each other before."

Lan Wangji hums, leaning in then turning his face to Wei Wuxian who meets him in the middle with a simple press of lips.

Lan Wangji pulls back. "If we are to arrive in Qinghe by evening, we should leave soon."

Wei Wuxian chases him, one quick peck and then another. "You are capable Lan-er-gege, I know you'll get us there on time."

"Ridiculous," he breathes, but he's smiling, so Wei Wuxian kisses him again.

Chapter End Notes

I thrive on kudos and comments (emojis are a valid form of communication!!)

if you want to yell at me, you can find me on [tumblr](#) and [twitter](#)

but I'm most active here and in a few servers on discord, like [Haven](#), which is a wonderful writing focused server, and [Danmei Destination](#) which is all things, well, Danmei lol

A/N: I fully expect at least one comment asking about Jin Zixun, specifically his whereabouts. I honestly don't know where he is, my brain put him in a cell and forgot he existed—just like Wei Wuxian (lol)... I'm going to assume they didn't leave him in the dungeon ~~where he belongs~~ but have since sent him off on some menial task that is absolutely below his station but has been sprinkled with glitter so he thinks it's not. All that matters is he's not here causing problems XD

I hope y'all enjoyed 💜

Cruxes

Chapter Notes

We're almost there! (and for anyone who saw the chapter count change from 12 to 11 and back again... no you didn't 🤪)

Big thanks to everyone who put up with me while I wrote this, your encouragement and assistance along the way mean the world to me. I couldn't have done it without you. And all the love in the world to [MsJulia](#) for making sure my love hate relationship with commas doesn't embarrass me and helped tweak a few areas to perfection. Any errors are mine alone and are fixable, immediately, if pointed out!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Lan Wangji sets them down within walking distance from Qinghe, giving Wei Wuxian enough space to collect himself on the final walk in. Even without announcing their early arrival, Nie Huaisang greets them at the gates.

“Hanguang-jun, Wei-xiong,” he greets with a bow. “It’s good to see you safe on your journey.”

“I apologize for being early,” Wei Wuxian says, bowing in return. “I heard the weather might be turning and wanted to ensure we made it with no issues.”

“Ah, no, don’t apologize, Wei-xiong. We had rooms prepared as soon as we received your letter.” He turns his attention to Lan Wangji. “Wangji-xiong, will you be staying also?” Lan Wangji nods and Nie Huaisang smiles. “Good, good. We’ll have your rooms freshened up for you.”

Lan Wangji hums and Wei Wuxian can tell it’s one of his non committal hums. “Thank you.”

Nie Huaisang’s smile widens. “Well, come on! We might as well start since the day is still young.” Wei Wuxian laughs when Lan Wangji glances at the sun—set low in the western sky.

They are led into the imposing structure and Wei Wuxian itches to reach out and run his fingers down the worn smooth brick. As Nie Huaisang turns down a narrow corridor, Wei Wuxian tries not to get turned around. He knows from his time spent inside these walls—years from now—that they are on a circular route around the outer edges of the fortress. This isn’t a route they took last time. They walk in silence.

“Da-ga should be waiting,” Nie Huaisang says, unlocking a heavy wooden door. Wei Wuxian is surprised to see a flight of steps descending downward, seemingly carved into the bedrock, instead of a room.

“Nie-xiong, you’re not taking us to your dungeon are you?” He tries to sound light hearted but his nerves give his jest an edge of wrongness.

Nie Huaisang turns so quickly, Wei Wuxian nearly runs into him. “I would never, Wei-xiong,” Nie Huaisang says, so fierce Wei Wuxian’s breath catches. For a moment he’s decades from now with a life weary and hardened Nie Huaisang standing shoulder to shoulder—ignoring the streaked tears on both their faces.

“I know, Sangsang.” He quickly glances at Lan Wangji. “We never came this way. In the future.”

Nie Huaisang taps his fan against his chin. “Where did we work last time?” His head tilts, just a little. “Surely it wasn’t the main library?”

“No—well, some. There were a few times we pulled references from the main library, but most of the time was spent in a study off your rooms.”

Nie Huaisang looks over his shoulder, thoughtful and a little lost. When he turns back to them he has a smile on his face. “Well I guess you get to see where they were originally stored.”

Wei Wuxian recognizes the fear in his friend’s eyes and can’t stop from reaching out and quickly wrapping his arms around the other man. “It worked. It’ll be okay, you have my word on it.” Nie Huaisang melts against him.

Nie Mingjue is indeed waiting for them at the bottom. Light talismans illuminate the room, taking most of the oppressive shadow out of the space. As Wei Wuxian crosses to the heavy desk, the resentment pulls on him, its ghostly fingers catching on his sleeves and hems.

“Is there a secret tunnel to the blades?” he asks, unable to stop himself from turning slowly, taking in the room at large.

Nie Mingjue looks him over and nods to the far wall Wei Wuxian is facing. “Why ask if you already know?”

Wei Wuxian bows to him. “I have never seen this room before. My time was spent in a study located near Nie Huaisang’s rooms.” Nie Mingjue shoots his brother a glance, but says nothing. “Thank you for having us. Your trust in me will not be misplaced.”

Nie Mingjue pushes a scroll across the table, his irritation pulls the resentment to him similarly to the way it wafts around Wei Wuxian when he uses it. “Stop that. We are beyond formalities at this point, since you obviously know more about my ancestry than we do.”

The hostility in his words set Wei Wuxian’s nerves on edge. Beside him, Lan Wangji tenses. He brushes his fingers against the back of Lan Wangji’s hand and feels his grip around Bichen relax.

“I assure you I will never know as much about your history as you. My goal was simply to help a friend.”

Nie Mingjue leans back, crossing his arms over his chest. It would be intimidating if Wei Wuxian was inclined to allow it, but he isn't. "You'll excuse my reservations. Generations of my forefathers have struggled with and fallen to this curse and I'm supposed to believe someone younger than my brother is simply going to whisk in and save the day?"

Wei Wuxian closes the distance to the table in a few unrushed steps. He doesn't have time for posturing. Instead, he lifts the scroll—it's one he didn't read last time and easily a few hundred years old if the coloring is to be believed. "Well, your forefathers weren't as capable as I in the handling of resentful energy."

Nie Mingjue snaps forward, swiping for the scroll, his hand a hair's breadth from snatching the document as Wei Wuxian steps out of range.

"Da-ge, no!" Nie Huaisang yelps, rushing between Wei Wuxian and the table. Wei Wuxian shakes his head, slow and barely noticeable but Lan Wangji steps back nonetheless.

Wei Wuxian steps back to the table, gently moving Nie Huaisang to the side and lays the scroll in the middle of the table as he leans into Nie Mingjue's space. "You might have come to terms with an early grave, Nie-zongzhu, but your brother would much prefer you die as an elder, safe in your bed. I mean no disrespect when I say this, but I really am the only hope you have at the moment to overcome this malady."

From this close Wei Wuxian can see the tension coursing through Nie Mingjue; the grinding of his teeth is loud enough to hear. Wei Wuxian holds eye contact as he leans back. "There is a sister scroll to this one. I need it, and a third that discusses the first saber created."

Beside him, Nie Huaisang worries his fan, lip caught between his teeth.

Wei Wuxian turns his attention from one brother to the other. "Sang-ge, will you fetch them, please?"

Nie Huaisang's eyes snap to him then trace around the room. His steps, when he moves are assured, fingers swift on the shelves as he pulls two volumes from different cases. Wei Wuxian unbinds one and then the other; placing all three together afterwards. "Thank you, Sang-ge. Your intelligence never gets the praise it deserves."

Nie Mingjue stands, the chair scraping against the stone floor. "You expect me to believe you can break a multi-generational curse with just these three scrolls."

Wei Wuxian lays a hand on the closest. "These three scrolls represent nearly three seasons worth of research that never came to fruition. When I brought the possibility to your brother he spent countless nights pouring over everything in his collection that directly covered the curse. We crafted every array we could imagine but each attempt failed... some spectacularly. We were nearly at our limit, depleted of both hope and energy when he suggested we start over." Wei Wuxian takes a deep breath, laying his hand on Nie Huaisang's shoulder. "When the dust settled, you were so distraught it took two days to calm your tears. It hadn't been simple, but the pain it could have saved was overwhelming." Wei Wuxian turns his attention back to Nie Mingjue. "Let me help make the Nie a more powerful sect. A sect led by

someone powerful enough to rule for decades unbothered by his strength or the fear of a sword at his neck.”

Nie Huaisang snuffles. “Da-ga, please. What harm can come from trying?”

Nie Mingjue snatches Baxia from where she has stood against the wall behind him. “You have free range of the Unclean Realm until you have constructed whatever it is you need.”

They let him leave without comment. When his steps have faded Nie Huaisang throws himself at Wei Wuxian. “Wei-xiong, how do you have a thick enough face to just stand there and say those things to Da-ge?! He’s so mad, I’m surprised he didn’t snap!”

Wei Wuxian pats Nie Huaisang’s back then untangles himself. “Don’t worry, Nie-xiong, I’m terrified too.” He turns to Lan Wangji, a step behind them. “Come on, let’s go find dinner. Lan Zhan should have something before it gets too late.” Wei Wuxian ignores the way Nie Huaisang looks between the two of them.

They retire to Lan Wangji’s rooms, secluded from the bustle of the fortress at the far end of a hall. The privacy was intimate the last time they were here, and watching Lan Wangji brushing his hair leaves Wei Wuxian itching with an insatiable desire to be the one holding the brush.

Lan Wangji looks across to Wei Wuxian who positioned himself on the cushion closest to the bed so he could lean against it for support and still face Lan Wangji. “How will you do it?”

“May I?” Wei Wuxian asks, holding out his hand and Lan Wangji, despite the blush that dusts his ears and neck, hands over the brush.

Wei Wuxian doesn’t answer at first, instead concentrating on the fine, silky texture of Lan Wangji’s hair. He finishes the section, brushing it into the rest then divides another to work on. It’s a mostly useless act, honestly; Lan Wangji’s hair is as disciplined and well trained as he is. Unlike Wei Wuxian’s unruly mane.

Either way he sets a steady, soothing pace and begins. “Do you know how the sabers are created?” he asks, pausing when he pulls the brush free to allow Lan Wangji to answer. He shakes his head, no. Wei Wuxian continues brushing. “Each saber is initially crafted the same as any other spiritual weapon. The difference comes after it has been granted to the wielder. If it is destined for anyone outside the ruling family then it remains just that, an uninfluenced spiritual weapon. But the ruling family is held to a different standard. As the generations went on, the sect leaders had higher levels of cultivation, which worsened the problem with the sabers.

“The first attempt at suppressing the saber spirits and trying to circumvent the growing issue worked, but proved to be less than efficient as a long term solution. So the Sixth Leader commissioned the tombs to be built on the Xinglu Ridge.” Wei Wuxian stops to part another section before continuing, “Those scrolls cover the steps needed to trap the spirit inside the

blade. Using that information I discovered a way to exercise the spirit and in turn break the inadvertent curse their suppression has caused.”

Silence sits between them for a moment.

“Would you like me to braid your hair for sleep?” Wei Wuxian asks, running his fingers through Lan Wangji’s hair a few times. He can feel the shiver run through Lan Wangji’s body before he nods, just once. Wei Wuxian gets to work deftly pulling the hair into a braid that falls smooth from the top of his head down. When he nears the end he lets the braid tangle on itself so the tip is braided a bit separately and should hold until morning. It was a trick his sister had taught him when he was young. He lays the braid over Lan Wangji’s shoulder and leans forward to kiss the crown of his head.

“Wei Ying?” Lan Wangji turns, taking Wei Wuxian’s hand in his to pull him around so they face each other. Wei Wuxian hums, settling on the floor so their knees touch. “What is your plan with the spirits?” He brushes a length of hair over Wei Wuxian’s shoulder. “Did you use the seal to control them last time?”

Wei Wuxian nods, scooting around so he can press against Lan Wangji’s side. “It was a hard battle but I think I figured out how to make it easier this time.” Lan Wangji hums as Wei Wuxian takes a deep breath and leans into Lan Wangji. “Come on, let’s get you to bed.”

Lan Wangji lets Wei Wuxian pull him to his feet. “Will you stay?” he asks, standing his ground and gently gripping Wei Wuxian’s wrist when Wei Wuxian tries to turn him toward the bed.

Wei Wuxian wants nothing more than to stay. “Not tonight. I need to redesign the arrays I’ll use and I don’t want to keep you up.” He chuckles when Lan Wangji’s face shifts. “Don’t pout,” he says, and kisses him on the cheek. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

Lan Wangji holds tight for a moment. “Do you know where your rooms are located?”

The question hits Wei Wuxian and he thinks back. Nie Huaisang said there had been rooms prepared for him when they first arrived, but they’d hardly stopped once they entered, going straight from the gates to meet with Nie Mingjue, then to an early dinner. While they waited for the meal, their conversations had been superficial. Most of Wei Wuxian’s attention had been on Nie Huaisang who had engaged him in a conversation about the aeration techniques he’d learned from a few of the Wen elders before leaving Lotus Pier. They’d spoken at length about various crops and the benefits utilizing the land would afford the sect. It had only been the three of them so when Nie Huaisang wished them a good night and left Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji alone, Wei Wuxian had followed Lan Wangji —unconsciously because of course he had, without asking for directions to his rooms.

Wei Wuxian laughs. “Well I suppose unless I want to bug someone, which I am loath to do, then I’ll be staying for the night.”

Lan Wangji smirks and Wei Wuxian wonders if he can love a person more than he does this ridiculous man. He tells him as much and gets nothing for his trouble except a tiny, unrepentant shrug.

“It has been a long night. Sleep so you will be refreshed when you begin tomorrow.”

Wei Wuxian steps close so he can drape his free arm over Lan Wangji’s shoulder and sag against him. Whatever witty remark he had planned dies on his tongue when Lan Wangji pulls him flush and kisses his temple. Wei Wuxian buries his head in Lan Wangji’s neck. The thought of how much they missed hits him, again, and he just breathes through the sting.

“It’s time to change your bandages. You are favoring your left arm.”

“You’ve been holding it hostage, did you think I’d pull away?” Wei Wuxian protests as he turns toward the divider, hurt flashes across Lan Wangji’s face—there and gone so fast anyone else would have missed it, but Wei Wuxian knows him.

“Hey.” He steps back to Lan Wangji, taking his face in his hands. “The distance I put between us during the war was fueled by fear. I had given away the only thing that I thought made us equal and when we spoke, I mislabeled *your* fear as anger. I let the misery fester and by the time I found myself in the Burial Mounds again there were no words that could change our course.”

Lan Wangji shakes his head and in the low light Wei Wuxian can see the shimmer of unshed tears. “You were in pain. I should have explained myself better.”

Wei Wuxian wipes the tear from Lan Wangji’s cheek, “Ah, sweetheart, you couldn’t have known. I went to my grave with my secrets.” He kisses Lan Wangji’s cheek, tasting the salt on his lips. “Words will come easier to us now.”

Wei Wuxian spends the next day in the main library surrounded by a growing stack of pages while Lan Wangji reads at a neighboring table. His presence is soothing and helps Wei Wuxian concentrate. The array comes together much like it did the first time, limiters and traps and containment layered and woven together in a way to keep the spirits focused on the fight instead of trying to escape into the wild. He stops for a light lunch, his efforts awarded by a completed design before dinner. Nie Huaisang assures him that Nie Mingjue will be present at the meal so Wei Wuxian can explain his plan.

“You’re insane,” Nie Mingjue says after listening to Wei Wuxian’s explanation. “I know you say you accomplished it before, but I still have doubts.”

“Both times I have explained it to Nie Huaisang he has said the same thing,” Wei Wuxian assures.

Lan Wangji turns to Wei Wuxian. “Do you plan to face them alone?”

Wei Wuxian turns to him, the brothers all but forgotten. “The first time it was just Nie Huaisang and the two of us, but if you don’t want to be there I’m sure it will be fine with just myself and Nie Mingjue.”

“I have no issues being there.”

Wei Wuxian smiles with a nod then turns back to the brothers. “You can fan yourself all you want, Nie-xiong, it’s exactly what you’re thinking.”

Nie Mingjue rolls his eyes at his brother. “When do you want to try this?”

Wei Wuxian looks out the window. “Tomorrow or the next night. The added darkness from the new moon will help the resentment flow easier.”

Nie Mingjue takes a drink. “I assume this will happen inside the Saber Hall.” Wei Wuxian nods. “Might as well get it over with. What time do you want to start tomorrow?”

“We should be inside before the sun sets, well rested and ready for a battle.”

Nie Mingjue nods in turn.

Back in Lan Wangji’s room, Wei Wuxian sprawls out in the middle of the floor while the other man begins his nightly routine. When Lan Wangji finishes and Wei Wuxian hasn’t moved he settles on the floor also.

When Lan Wangji lays his hand on Wei Wuxian’s elbow where it sits atop his hip, Wei Wuxian closes his eyes with a smile. “Wei Ying. You cannot be comfortable.”

“You underestimate me, Lan Zhan,” Wei Wuxian says.

Lan Wangji’s thumb traces slow circles on Wei Wuxian’s arm. “You should get proper rest tonight.”

Wei Wuxian peeks an eye open. “Who said I was gonna sleep on the floor?”

Lan Wangji lifts a single eyebrow as if to drill home his point.

Wei Wuxian’s smile morphs into a grin, his eyes closing again as he teases, “Is the illustrious Hanguang-jun asking to take me to bed again?”

Lan Wangji moves his hand to Wei Wuxian’s cheek, his silence drawing Wei Wuxian’s eyes open. He is not prepared for the sadness that has settled on Lan Wangji’s face.

His heart breaks in his chest. “Your sad eyes have no effect on me, Lan Zhan,” he says even as he gives himself away by sitting up, unfortunately dislodging Lan Wangji’s hand in the process.

“What’s wrong?” he asks once he’s fully upright and facing Lan Wangji.

Lan Wangji shakes his head, looking away.

“None of that. Talk to me?” Fear spikes in Wei Wuxian’s veins, his hand moving to Lan Wangji’s cheek. Lan Wangji resists turning his face, keeping his eyes cast to the floor; Wei Wuxian’s heart rate doubles.

When Lan Wangji finally speaks his voice is barely more than a whisper. “I am worried about your plan.”

“Ah,” Wei Wuxian breathes, the relief that washes over him leaves tremors in its wake. He settles with his legs crossed and takes Lan Wangji’s hands in his. “Let’s go over everything until you are confident in me.”

Lan Wangji’s eyes snap to his. “I have full confidence in you.”

Wei Wuxian cups his palm to Lan Wangji’s cheek again, his thumb swiping once across the cheekbone. “We did this once, I know we can do it again.”

“You were not injured last time.”

Wei Wuxian smiles at the protest. “Who says I wasn’t?”

Lan Wangji’s chin lifts. “I would not have allowed it.”

His delight clashes with the sober conversation so Wei Wuxian leans back, using Lan Wangji’s hands as a counter to keep him upright. He uses the motion to engage the muscles in his chest and shoulders, twisting a little he tests his side as well. “Most of my involvement will be on Chenqing so the only thing I’m really worried about will be stiffness and fatigue in my shoulder.”

He lets go, maintaining his precarious tilt and lifts his left arm in a simulation of holding Chenqing, “I should be able to adjust my hold to lighten the pressure if it starts to bother me.”

Lan Wangji hums as he pulls Wei Wuxian upright. “Is there anything I can do to help?” Wei Wuxian grins, but before he can say anything Lan Wangji calls his name, causing Wei Wuxian to laugh.

“Okay, okay. Let me get ready for bed.”

When Wei Wuxian presses his palm to Lan Wangji’s cheek again, Lan Wangji lets his face be guided up without hesitation. Wei Wuxian stands frozen for two breaths, staring down into Lan Wangji’s earnest young face, before he can move again, forcing himself to step away from his kneeling zhiji. “Ah, Lan Zhan. I forget how young we were.”

That night Wei Wuxian dreams of the first siege on the Burial Mounds in broken fragments—the last and most final of the many endings to his first youth.

After breakfast Lan Wangji leads Wei Wuxian back to their rooms in hopes of convincing him to rest some more. Wei Wuxian tries, he does, he pulls Lan Wangji into bed, hoping the warmth and weight will soothe him but can do nothing but toss and turn. By early afternoon he’s annoyed as well as restless and tense enough to know something has to be done about it to prevent any consequences. In the adjoining room Wei Wuxian fills the tub and slaps a talisman on it to warm the water.

Lan Wangji sits with him, quiet but there, his proximity more than enough to help Wei Wuxian relax into the heat and steam. He finds himself gently shaken awake, rested but no less nervous than he started. After drying off he lets Lan Wangji redress his shoulder and side, instructing him to wrap the bandages a little tighter around his ribs before he finishes shrugging on the top layers of the training robes brought for this battle. He allows Lan Wangji to fuss over him before throwing himself back on the bed.

From the corner of his eye Wei Wuxian watches Lan Wangji cross to the low table, setting up his guqin in an elegant motion. Wei Wuxian closes his eyes and lets the music wash over him.

“I think we should wait,” Lan Wangji says without looking up two songs in.

“I won’t.”

Lan Wangji thrums the opening chords of Clarity but doesn’t say anything as Wei Wuxian sits up.

As Wei Wuxian ties his bracers a few minutes later Lan Wangji tries again. “Chifeng-zun will understand.”

Wei Wuxian crosses to him and kisses the crown of his head. “I turned the tides of war on far less sleep than I’ve had the last few days.”

Wei Wuxian gives Lan Wangji room to stand, and allows himself to be bundled against his chest.

“If you will not take care for yourself will you think of me instead?”

Wei Wuxian inhales the calming scent of sandalwood. He has no words to argue, trapped as they are in his throat behind tears, but he shakes his head. He feels Lan Wangji let out a breath, defeated, and tries not to feel too mad at himself for winning.

The Sword Hall is exactly the same as it was the first time he and Lan Wangji stumbled through the crumbled wall. He follows Nie Mingjue through the winding corridors to the central room. From here they can see nearly every casket laid to rest in the mausoleum.

“The older caskets are stationed closer to the far walls.” Nie Mingjue says motioning around them.

With a nod, Wei Wuxian spreads his notes across one of the casket lids so they can go over the plans of attack one last time. “I am going to start with the younger swords so that we can take care of the more powerful ones first.”

“You did it the same last time?”

Wei Wuxian shakes his head. “We worked in an inward spiral, starting with the oldest.”

Nie Mingjue crosses his arms, weariness warring with excitement. “So why the change?”

“Most of the older spirits went with little fight but the last few were ferocious. If I start with them while I’m fresh it should help the rest of the process run smoother.”

Lan Wangji lifts the sheet with the array, reading it closely. “You will not be able to stop once you start.”

“That’s correct. It was the same the first time.”

“Would it not be beneficial to have a second inside with you?” he presses.

“Lan Zhan, we covered this.”

“And it was assumed we would all be fully rested.” He has turned his full attention to Wei Wuxian.

“We’ve discussed that as well.” Wei Wuxian takes Lan Wangji’s hand in his, squeezing it once before letting go and crossing to an open area a few feet from dead center.

Wei Wuxian pulls a small blade from his belt as he kneels and draws it across his palm. “It shouldn’t take too long to draw the arrays.” He sweeps his palm around him, the outside circle coming into existence.

“Wei Ying.” Lan Wangji says; it’s the closest to a growl he’s heard from him in years. “You never said anything about drawing blood.”

“It strengthens the array Lan Zhan. You know this.”

The rest of the array goes down in silence.

Lan Wangji’s mouth is set in a hard line when Wei Wuxian turns back to him. He isn’t happy but he’s still helpful, passing Wei Wuxian’s qiankun pouch when he reaches for it.

“The first ring of the array shouldn’t be crossed by either of you,” Wei Wuxian says, tucking the seal into his belt. He can feel both of their eyes on him. “I’m serious. Coming across will deactivate the array and release everything being held inside.”

Lan Wangji steps to the first line, the toe of his boot a hair’s breadth away. “You need to choose one of us to be inside the array.”

“Absolutely not.”

“That was not a request.”

“Neither was my original statement.”

For a moment they face off, two immovable forces.

Wei Wuxian deflates first, making his way to the edge without stepping on any lines. “I’m not fighting with you over this. You have to understand that right now I’m the only person remotely capable of controlling the spirits as soon as they exit the swords. I will not put you in any more danger than I already have and it can’t be Nie Mingjue because I can’t take the chance of injuring or killing another Sect leader.”

Nie Mingjue scoffs. “You hardly killed the last one.”

Wei Wuxian shoots him a look but turns back to Lan Wangji. “If it makes you feel better, you did not like the way I handled this last time either. You argued the same point, then listed three others before finally allowing it.”

Lan Wangji doesn’t budge so Wei Wuxian leans forward and kisses him once, unrepentant of his actions.

“You said you trusted me, right?”

“That is unfair.” Lan Wangji’s shoulders droop, as much as they ever would in front of anyone besides Wei Wuxian, but he doesn’t argue.

Wei Wuxian pulls him close, leaning their foreheads together; the medallion pressed securely between them. “It won’t be easy, but we’ll be okay.”

Lan Wangji nods, a barely there movement before pulling away so Wei Wuxian can finish.

Wei Wuxian has to slice his hand a second time to complete the activation sigils. When the seal flares to life Wei Wuxian finds himself standing in utter silence. It wasn’t a necessary part of the array but he didn’t want to chance distracting either of them from their own battles. He spends a few moments breathing, testing the expansion of his lungs against his ribs. When he decides the pain will be tolerable he opens himself to the ambient resentful energy present in the room. The dark mass floods his senses, its chill bone deep, a desolate winter’s morning after a harsh blizzard.

Despite the shivers racing through him he lifts Chenqing to his lips and begins.

The first few spirits are fierce, as he knew they would be. They fight him with every note, angry in a way only the most powerful of spirits are. Each one rebels as he pulls them into himself to be transferred to the seal. He catches Lan Wangji’s eye after the third and it’s clear he does not approve. Wei Wuxian looks away as he continues.

He moves his attention through the mausoleum, pulling one spirit, then another, then another from their swords. He finds a rhythm and sets a pace. Call, defeat, absorb. Process, transfer, repeat. The seal is a powerful thing but it can’t be trusted to simply take the energy directly into itself without risking a rupture.

From the moment he opened himself to the seal, the spirits within began to whisper. Wei Wuxian tries to ignore them, but their voices are as persistent as mosquitos in may—always

buzzing in his ears.

“You left us.”

“You promised, but you still left us.”

“Do you think we would forget?”

“You need us.”

“Do you think we are just a tool to be used?”

He forces himself to concentrate on the task at hand as he calls another spirit free.

Call, defeat, absorb. Process, transfer, repeat.

Wei Wuxian realizes his mistake a little over halfway through the cleansing. It starts slow, two spirits slipping free instead of one. It isn't ideal, but it's manageable. Lan Wangji suppresses one with his guqin while Nie Mingjue directs the other to Wei Wuxian—both weakened enough to prevent an extended battle, before he pulls them into his meridians along with the others making the journey to the seal.

He plays a sharp note reaching for the next row of caskets and can only watch as the first wave of spirits burst free of their confines to wash around the others. Lan Wangji and Nie Mingjue take it in stride, each of them stepping up to the challenge.

When Wei Wuxian pulls the last of the spirits to him he has just enough time to make eye contact with Lan Wangji before the next wave assaults them.

It only spirals from there.

The remaining spirits crash around them a third time with the intensity of a tsunami; their numbers far exceeding the capabilities of even the greatest cultivators. The roiling mass moves with intelligence, striking at its opponents, as if testing for weaknesses.

When a spirit, quick as a cobra, wraps itself around Lan Wangji's leg and nearly pulls him from his feet, Wei Wuxian reacts on instinct. He knows changing the cadence mid-bar will turn everything's attention immediately to him. He has just enough time to see Nie Mingjue brace Lan Wangji before the resentment closes around the array like a veil.

With his lungs on fire and muscles stiff—despite the tremors threatening to turn his insides to mush—Wei Wuxian plays on.

Around him the energy condenses, its movements becoming physical enough to buffet against him. The first time it succeeds in nearly knocking him from his feet he channels them to the outer wall of the array. They obey, swarming like fish in a bowl, around and around until their movements turn them into a swirling storm, violent enough to raise the hair on his arms as the air charges with a promise of lightning.

Wei Wuxian knows he's running out of time. Knows he isn't strong enough to channel everything at once and knows the spirits won't play nice and line up for him.

"You know you need us," the spirits inside the seal whisper again.

Wei Wuxian inhales through his nose, using the extra breath to shift and change the focus of the song to the seal instead of the spirits; he only has one shot at this. One chance to fully open the seal. One chance to maintain control and not fall beyond the horizon again.

The seal opens like an unforgiving whirlpool, pulling the swirling mass into an inky void. The energy burns as it races through and around him; he ignores it, eyes trained on the seal spinning wildly to his right. One flash then another, the dark mass thins but it's still too much.

A third flash is followed by the tale-tale hiss of a coming fracture. Still he pushes. He's too close. The seal shimmers, a glow spreading from the center, hot enough to wick the moisture from his skin. His fingers burn as they wield Chenqing.

He pushes on forcing time to bend around him. He needs more time.

Shapes begin to emerge, the resentment thinning with each note. He hears the first crack but doesn't stop. Can't stop. He has to get the last of the spirits under control, fully contained inside the seal. He shivers, as the spirits assault him, fighting his commands to move on, to release their hold on the Nie.

He'd been mistaken. This time and the first. The most powerful hadn't been the younger ones. He should have known, had seen it with his own eyes in the way Nie Huaisang moved about in the world—controlling things from the back.

A lone spirit resists, clinging to him, its claws sunk deep in his side. He doesn't have time for this. He tries to shake it off, force it on to the seal, but it simply burrows in more with each attempt. Desperate, Wei Wuxian ignores it. He's out of time with too many things left unfinished.

He inhales again and focuses on pulling the beast from Baxia. He can see his companions outside the array, a world apart from him. The look on Lan Wangji's face is heartbreaking but Nie Mingjue is doing as asked, keeping the other man in place. Baxia is in the air before either notice what Wei Wuxian is doing. It's too late to stop him as the dark mass pours free, sinking to the stones as it moves toward him.

The seal creaks and fractures again, another flash illuminating the mausoleum.

The ancient spirit laughs. "He will devour you."

"Then we go down together," Wei Wuxian growls, letting the seal reach through him to pull the spirit inside.

Wei Wuxian doesn't flinch when the spirit screams, tearing at his side as the seal rips it to pieces.

For a moment it's just him, the seal, and Baxia's beast prowling inside the array. The shadows around them shift from wisps of smoke to thick, suffocating blankets, changing in the glow cast by the seal. Wei Wuxian glances up, judging the progress of the fissures. If it holds he'll have enough time. Maybe.

Chancing a look beyond, he watches Nie Mingjue track the beast, a look of awe carved across his face. Wei Wuxian wonders if he ever imagined how the spirit would manifest outside the sword. Nie Mingjue's arm is still barred across Lan Wangji's chest and when Wei Wuxian makes eye contact with Lan Wangji he can't help the pain that lances his heart.

Lan Wangji is terrified but holding himself back; he trusts Wei Wuxian and all Wei Wuxian wants is to be worthy of that trust. He nods to him and looks away.

Baxia takes advantage of his distraction and wraps itself around him. It's not how he wanted the fight to go but Wei Wuxian knows how to end it swiftly. He plays a series of escalating notes that draws the seal within reach and angers Baxia enough to coil tighter.

When he knows he won't miss, he drops Chenqing and grabs both the seal and Baxia, he exhales and opens himself further than he ever has before.

Time stops as Baxia is pulled through him, consumed by the seal.

Fire races from his fingertips to his heart, filling his meridians with lava. He clamps his mouth shut and doesn't scream. He won't do that to Lan Wangji. Curling in on himself, Wei Wuxian imagines the life he'd been torn from, remembers each sacrifice that made that beautiful life possible. The tears when they fall sear his cheeks. Numbness follows in the wake of Baxia's progress through his battered body and it's the icy chill that Wei Wuxian holds tight to. In his right hand the seal wails in anger.

Wei Wuxian is out of time.

As he grasps the seal in both hands he knows if he can break it along the seam it will fall inert and be easier to destroy. He twists, trying to dislodge the pieces and discovers the influx of resentful energy has welded the sections together.

Cognizant as it is, it fights him from his first effort. He can feel the spirits pulse against the seams. The seal cracks further. Despite the risk Wei Wuxian continues.

Inhaling with a growl, Wei Wuxian twists, leaning over himself in hopes of finding the leverage needed to break the cursed object. It's tortuous, the metal scalding.

He inhales again, and on his exhale he throws his head back and allows the scream inside to escape.

His lungs burn like they had when the waterborne abyss had dragged him beneath the surface. His vision blurs, narrowing at the edges until the light moves like shadows underwater. Beneath him the seal flickers and flashes violently, hissing in protest.

The explosion, when it finally comes an eternity later, fully engulfs him.

His world goes from white to black instantly. Distantly he registers the coldness of the stones as he falls to his knees, the last of the air knocked from his lungs as he begins to fall forward.

There's screaming. It's not him. It's far away. Beyond the array that contained the explosion and saved the mausoleum and everyone else inside.

There's another flash.

Blue this time. Bichen.

Wei Wuxian smiles.

"Thank you. I'm sorry." he gasps as Lan Wangji bundles him into his arms.

He tries to lift his hand to pat Lan Wangji's cheek but the blood soaked appendage distracts him.

This didn't happen last time, he thinks and when Lan Wangji shushes him he realizes he'd spoken aloud. I should tell him I love him, he thinks, tell him I'm sorry and only ever wanted to live beside him.

Lan Wangji's sob is answer enough.

Wei Wuxian tries to concentrate on breathing. It's so hard. His chest feels hollow, caved in. Each time he blinks it takes longer to open his eyes.

When he can no longer keep them open to look at Lan Wangji's face, he lets the darkness take him.

Chapter End Notes

I thrive on kudos and comments (emojis are a valid form of communication!!)

if you want to yell at me, you can find me on [tumblr](#) and [twitter](#)

but I'm most active here and in a few servers on discord, like [Haven](#), which is a wonderful writing focused server, and [Danmei Destination](#) which is all things, well, Danmei lol



Healing

Chapter Notes

I know it was just one day, but I'm still going to apologize for getting off schedule. Life did that thing it likes to do.

I do feel it should be noted this chapter was completely rewritten because I felt these interactions needed to be told now over how I was originally going to show them next chapter. You guys deserve the insight I hope is reflected in this chapter.

As always, all the love in the world to [MsJulia](#) for taking time out of her incredibly busy life to help make this story shine.

Any errors are mine alone and are fixable, immediately, if pointed out!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It's dark when Wei Wuxian blinks awake, his mind sluggish in the way Wen Qing's heavier medicines leave him. Despite this, his side is on fire and every effort to move leaves him winded. After a moment he tries again, but when he presses his palm to the bed for leverage, pain races up his arm directly to his heart. He collapses onto his back again.

From the other side of the room there's a rustling of heavy robes falling into places; Wei Wuxian holds his breath as light flickers to life around the room.

Wen Qing steps into view and Wei Wuxian feels his eyes fill with tears. "How are you feeling?"

"How..." Wei Wuxian clears his throat. "How are Lan Zhan and Chifeng-zun?"

She scoffs, crossing to sit on the edge of his bed. "You know they are well, physically. Ask the question you really want."

Wei Wuxian exhales, closing his eyes. "I'm not dead so I'll survive."

"Why did you do it?" She rests her palm on his cheek.

Wei Wuxian leans into the touch, thinking back to the first time, surrounded by cultivators—his brother, too close to trust the backlash would miss him. Wei Wuxian had retreated into the cave, sealed its entrance, and held the seal as close as possible while it thrashed and fought for its freedom. He hadn't cared, at the time. He had been exhausted and wanted nothing more than rest; the darkness had been a blessing.

"Come on," she says, taking pity on him. "Let's get you up, you obviously need a hand."

Wei Wuxian helps as much as he can, the whole experience would be embarrassing if it weren't such a well choreographed action between them now.

When they make it back to the bed he tries to lower himself slowly but his knees betray him halfway so he collapses with a huff.

"How bad is it?" he asks when he catches his breath again.

Wen Qing helps him stretch out again, tucking the covers around him. "I had to restitch part of your side so the scarring is going to be more noticeable than it would have been, but I think the burns on your hands should be fine once they heal."

Wei Wuxian nods and absolutely does not try to close his hands into fists as he fights the pull of sleep.

When he wakes again it's to soft guqin music, but when he turns his face it's not the Jade he's expecting sitting by his bedside. "Xichen-ge?" he mumbles, confused, as he forces himself onto his side. He waits for the notes to fade before he speaks again. "Where is Lan Zhan?"

Lan Xichen's face remains impassive as he stands; Wei Wuxian swallows his concern and pushes himself upright, hissing when the movement pulls at his side. He dismisses Lan Xichen's efforts to have him lie back down with a shake of his head. He feels a little more human with his feet on the floor and he takes a moment to check in with himself. His whole body is stiff and tender as a bruise, but he's had worse and for the moment his concern lies elsewhere.

"I owe you an apology, Wei-gongzi," Lan Xichen says sitting down on the far end of the bed.

Wei Wuxian stands and is satisfied to find his balance intact. "No apology needed," he says, his tone exposing his exhaustion.

Lan Xichen's brows dip in concern. "Have you been cleared to be up on your own?"

Wei Wuxian continues across the room, which he now notices isn't the one he'd been sharing with Lan Wangji. "It's just my side again, as long as I don't pull the stitches I'll be fine."

"Ah, Wei-gongzi."

There's distress in his voice and from behind the divider Wei Wuxian hears him turn away. If he didn't want to be witness to Wei Wuxian changing he should have answered his question about Lan Wangji's whereabouts. Getting his robes on is a bit of a chore but he succeeds after only a few struggles.

Lan Xichen doesn't say anything until Wei Wuxian turns to leave. "You're leaving?" he asks, quickly moving between Wei Wuxian and the door.

Wei Wuxian closes his eyes, he wonders if the move was intentional or subconscious; wonders if it was borne from genuine concern for Wei Wuxian's health and wellbeing or a

sense of obligation to contain a possible threat. “Zewu-jun, if you would step aside.” He pauses, giving Lan Xichen a moment to move. “Unless I am being detained?”

After a moment Lan Xichen steps aside. “No, of course not.”

With a nod, Wei Wuxian steps past him and reaches for the door. Lan Xichen’s hand closes around his upper arm, loose so it does not hurt but tight enough to restrain. “Wei-gongzi, I must ask you to wait.”

Wei Wuxian’s stomach twists and he feels an urge to pull power to himself; his heart rate spikes causing his head to spin. He does not turn to look at the other man.

“Zewu-jun,” he says on an exhale. “I believe we share a different definition of detained.” He shakes his arm once to give him the opportunity to release his arm but finds the grip tightened instead. “I assure you I am in no mood for whatever game you are playing.” His voice has dropped, the warning clear in his tone.

“You’ll have to excuse me...” Lan Xichen begins, but Wei Wuxian cuts him off with another jerk of his arm.

“I will do no such thing until you release me.”

“I’m afraid I’m unable to do that.”

Wei Wuxian turns now, yanking his arm behind him as he goes. The move is so sudden it pulls Lan Xichen off balance, giving Wei Wuxian the opening he needs to slip free and turn for the door again. This time when Lan Xichen’s hand closes around Wei Wuxian’s left arm he pulls, exerting enough power to stop Wei Wuxian mid step. The movement aggravates the nearly healed sword strike. Wei Wuxian hisses at the flair of pain but stops.

“Can we not have a rational conversation?” Lan Xichen asks and it takes everything in Wei Wuxian’s power to not rise to the argument he knows could come so easily to him. Instead he remains silent.

“Your erratic behavior has been detrimental to your health and well-being,” Lan Xichen begins. “Must you always rush off?”

Wei Wuxian takes one deep breath, then another. “I am ambulant and see no ill-effect in giving my regards to my host for the care allotted to me while I was injured.” It’s a formal response even Madam Yu would be proud of, and Wei Wuxian does not miss Lan Xichen flinch. “Of the two of us, Zewu-zun, who is being irrational?” He shakes his arm again, just enough to make his point.

Lan Xichen finally releases Wei Wuxian. “I believe we have gotten off on the wrong foot, Wei-gongzi. Can we speak, for just a moment?” He motions to the low table.

Wei Wuxian glances at the door.

“My brother is not here, Wei-gongzi,” Lan Xichen adds.

And now he has all of Wei Wuxian's attention. The panic rises in his chest like a flash flood sweeping everything away in its wake. He knows the answer but he can't ask, can't force the words from his mouth.

Lan Xichen saves him from the impossible task. "He was escorted home by Shufu the day after your battle in the Nie Mausoleum. Wen-daifu had arrived overnight." He pauses, looking away from Wei Wuxian for a breath. "He put up no fight once she made her reassurances that you were safe and would make a full recovery."

"Why was he escorted home?" Wei Wuxian asks, the words like ash on his tongue. He isn't stupid, he knows the ins and outs of political wording—a ward will never be a son.

The air around Lan Xichen shifts, taking on a defensive edge. "Wangji left a seclusion imposed by the Elders to be here with you."

Wei Wuxian feels the heat drain from his body, a cold rage feeling his bones. "The reasoning for his seclusion?" he asks, quiet and far calmer than he feels.

Lan Xichen stills, even the rise and fall of his chest pausing as he considers Wei Wuxian. "The Elders decreed he remain in seclusion until they could properly determine the severity of punishment for Wangji's part in the initial interference in the Jin inquisition."

"Which was a farce," Wei Wuxian explodes, "and an entirely moot point since the charges were dropped!"

Lan Xichen stiffens but doesn't back down. "One should take responsibility for all of their actions."

"Don't you dare quote your precepts at me." Wei Wuxian's vision narrows, he can feel himself trembling, rage boiling his blood. "So help me, Lan Xichen, if you stood by and let your Elders issue a verdict resulting in Lan Zhan being subjugated to the Discipline Whip again, I will remind you why I was the most feared beast on the battlegrounds."

Lan Xichen lifts his chin, the movement small but noticeable after all of Wei Wuxian's years of watching Lan Wangji, he holds Wei Wuxian's gaze. "There is no reason for threats. You are not the only one, despite what you might believe, who cares for my brother." He pauses, giving Wei Wuxian a chance to rebuke his statement. Into the silence he continues. "Wangji will receive no corporal punishment; he is to remain in seclusion for no more than the season and was instructed to copy the precepts once before turning his attention to recreating as many copies of the lost or damaged volumes as he is capable of in the remainder of his time."

Wei Wuxian's strength leaves him and this time when Lan Xichen's hand closes around his arm there is nothing but concern in the grip. He allows himself to be guided back to the bed and doesn't fight when Lan Xichen fusses over him to ensure he is comfortable and can catch his breath.

"We heeded your warning, Wei Wuxian. Uncle was the first to speak and immediately forbade any and all physical punishments." While he talks he kneels before Wei Wuxian. "We are a proud clan but we take responsibility for our actions, no matter when they occurred."

They sit in silence for a moment and Wei Wuxian tries to calm his racing heart. The pounding in his ears settles as a heavy pressure behind his eyes forcing him to dash the tears that well up. Lan Xichen does not comment, simply moving to prepare tea from the service on the low table he had motioned to earlier.

“How long has he been gone?” Wei Wuxian finally asks, unable to focus on anything besides the time and distance between himself and Lan Wangji.

Lan Xichen looks up, his eyes full of concern. “It has been nearly a week.”

Wei Wuxian would laugh if his heart didn’t feel so bruised. Instead he looks down at his bandaged hands.

“I have sent him daily progress reports,” Lan Xichen says. When Wei Wuxian looks back up he continues, “Wen-daifu shared your communication talisman with us so we have been able to speak directly with one another.”

Wei Wuxian can’t help the smile that creeps in. “I think we have different definitions of seclusion as well.”

Lan Xichen sits the tray beside Wei Wuxian and for the first time since waking Wei Wuxian sees a true smile on Lan Xichen’s face.

That night everyone takes dinner together in the family wing. Wei Wuxian expects tension as he makes his way to the dining hall but is surprised by an indignant squawk from Nie Huaisang followed by a bellowing laugh that could only come from Nie Mingjue. His suspicion is verified when he enters in time to witness the man’s hand clamp on his little brother’s shoulder—preventing him from escaping.

“Wei-xiong!” Nie Huaisang calls, spotting him first.

“Wei-gongzi.” Nie Mingjue’s smile spreads, more carefree than Wei Wuxian has ever seen in his limited interactions with the sect leader.

Wei Wuxian bows, as best he can. “Chifeng-zun.”

Nie Mingjue waves off the formalities. “None of that. Come sit, you’re just in time.”

Sure enough, as Wei Wuxian settles beside Wen Qing, the first dishes are ushered into the room. The table fills, far fuller than necessary for their small group.

“Such a grand feast.” Wei Wuxian says, waiting for the meal to commence.

Nie Huaisang leans forward with unrestrained relief in his eyes. “It’s the least we can do, Wei-xiong.”

“Ah, it was a team effort. This humble one couldn’t have done it alone.”

“Be gracious when your accomplishments are acknowledged.” Lan Xichen smiles, lifting an eyebrow when Wei Wuxian shoots him a look.

Wei Wuxian doesn’t sigh, but he doesn't argue either. “A wise reminder.”

After dinner Nei Mingjue tells of the battery of tests he endured to ensure the curse had been lifted.

“The only thing that delayed the celebration was your health.” Nie Huaisang laments.

Wei Wuxian laughs. “Don’t let my health stop you! This celebration represents the prosperous future of the QingheNie Sect.”

Nie Huaisang launches into planning, everyone indulgent in his exuberance. Wei Wuxian lingers near Wen Qing, watching the scene with mixed emotions. The love the brothers share for one another is undeniable and leaves Wei Wuxian longing for the years before the war.

“I think you’ve had enough for the night,” Wen Qing announces.

Nie Huaisang drapes himself over Wei Wuxian who laughs good heartedly as he extracts himself. “Doctor’s orders, Sang-ge. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

He and Wen Qing leave the small group, retiring even before Lan Xichen. Wei Wuxian pulls her into a hug before they part company a few minutes later, feeling overfull with gratitude.

Jiang Cheng shows up two days later. Wei Wuxian isn’t surprised. Wen Qing had been in constant contact with his brother, their quick messages always seemingly concise and no nonsense but Wei Wuxian is a master at reading between the lines and has spent enough time with the both of them to read their tells (small as they are on Wen Qing’s part). The first time he’d pointed them out his observation had earned him a swift reprimand in the form of Wen Qing cuffing him in the back of his head. He’d laughed and silently swore to tease them both every chance he could.

When Jiang Cheng arrived, instead of admitting anything related to Wei Wuxian’s teasing, he announced his intentions of escorting Wei Wuxian to the mountain since he had no faith in him not injuring himself on his way.

Wei Wuxian doesn’t argue, instead a warmth blossoms in his chest. Who is he to pass up an opportunity to spend more time with his brother?

They decide to set out the following morning and are immediately sat upon by Nie Huaisang who cries injustice for them not attending the grand party he’s planning.

“What if we promise to let you organize the next large gathering we have at Lotus Pier?” Wei Wuxian offers in compromise as he's led away to the dining hall, Jiang Cheng and Wen Qing a step behind.

Nie Mingjue remains lighter, more carefree and grateful than Wei Wuxian expected. He finds himself greeted with a heavy hand on his shoulder, and Nie Mingjue's undivided attention. "You are as much a member of QingheNie as you are YunmengJiang."

Wei Wuxian considers deflecting, he'd done it that first night but understands Nie Mingjue's reasons for repeating the sentiment, so he accepts with a grace Jiang Yanli would be proud of. "It is a great honor. I hope our sects can grow and prosper alongside one another from today forward."

Once everyone settles, the talk turns to sect matters and other far less important topics. They skirt any discussions about Jin Guangyao and the actions that led to his ultimate betrayal. Wei Wuxian makes a mental note to remind everyone about the folly of judging someone for actions and events that had not occurred—and wouldn't have occurred for years to come either way.

Wei Wuxian lets the conversations shift around him and spends the second half of the meal in a lively conversation with Nie Huaisang about some of the shenanigans the two of them had gotten up to once everything had calmed down in the future. It's refreshing but the nostalgia leaves his heart aching.

The brothers take breakfast with Wen Qing, Nie Mingjue and Lan Xichen, the latter confirming everyone's travel plans and ensuring supplies had been obtained before the group makes their way to the gates.

Wen Qing and a small Jiang retinue join them only until their paths finally force them apart.

Wei Wuxian pulls Wen Qing into a quick hug, bows to the Jiang cultivators, then bolts for the market, both to make a few last minute purchases and to give the others time alone—if needed.

Jiang Cheng finds him negotiating the price of a trinket a handful of minutes later.

"You've always been good at charming the vendors," Jiang Cheng says when they're out of hearing range of the vendor.

Wei Wuxian shrugs, turning the little lotus charm between his fingers. "It was a hard learned skill."

Jiang Cheng doesn't say anything else until Wei Wuxian pulls a small knife from his belt once they have ventured beyond the town's main square. "What are you designing?" he asks, watching the first few lines come into existence.

"I'm recreating Jin Ling's gift." Wei Wuxian says without looking up. "It's meant to ward off evil spirits."

A couple of li pass in companionable silence before Jiang Cheng speaks again. "Are you going to go the whole way without talking?"

Jiang Cheng's petulant tone draws Wei Wuxian to a stop. "I'm not ignoring you..."

"I know that!" Jiang Cheng interrupts, huffing a little, then after a beat he adds, "Is this something you picked up... after?"

Wei Wuxian thinks about his focus on the gift and the silence that had fallen around him. "In the Burial Mounds it was easy to slip into the fixation of creating instead letting the enormity of our situation overwhelm me. If I could strengthen the wards or figure out the intricacies of my next array I could make it better, protect everyone the only way I still could." He trails off with a shrug.

The brothers glance away from each other for a moment, both seemingly in thought. When Wei Wuxian catches Jiang Cheng's eye he nods toward the direction they were walking and they mutually start down the road again.

Jiang Cheng clears his throat but doesn't immediately say anything when Wei Wuxian looks away from the sigil he's carving so after a second Wei Wuxian tucks the lotus into his sleeve.

"I'm not a mind reader Jiang Cheng." Wei Wuxian says a few minutes later when he can no longer ignore the continued glances.

When he speaks Jiang Cheng's tone is gruff, his attention focused on some nondescript thing in the distance to keep from looking at Wei Wuxian. "When you come back will you help fortify Lotus Pier?"

They're close enough that Wei Wuxian can bump their shoulders together. "I would love to."

The rest of their first day continues with lighter conversations and has them in content moods as they seek out room and board.

The next day dawns bright, the distance quickly falling away as they continue their journey but by midday a blanket of thick clouds crawl across the sky bringing with it a sharper chill.

When movement no longer keeps the cold from Wei Wuxian's skin he stops to pull out the thick blue-white cloak he'd found stashed in his qiankun pouch. He closes it around him and finds the comforting scent of *home* in ample supply. Jiang Cheng grumbles beside him and Wei Wuxian can't help but smile as he knocks their shoulders together.

"Are you mad you forgot to leave a cloak for your sweetheart?" he teases.

Jiang Cheng scoffs. "No, I'm mad because I forgot you're insufferable and now I'm stuck with you being lovey-dovey until we get there."

Wei Wuxian's chest warms. He'd missed their bantering more than he'd realized, having had time to mourn the loss before and after his first death.

He smiles and because he can't contain the childish glee he feels at being able to do so he says, "So you did leave her one of your traveling cloaks."

“You!”

Jiang Cheng's outburst is immediate, sending Wei Wuxian into a fit of laughter as he takes off running. There was never a chance of escaping, but the joy of the chase is what matters, and when Jiang Cheng's hand closes around his arm Wei Wuxian turns and pulls him into a fierce hug.

They stand there, Wei Wuxian far more out of breath than his brother, and say nothing for a moment.

“We're going to be okay.” Wei Wuxian says without pulling away. “We have the rest of our lives to make the sect what we want it to be and nothing will stop us.”

Jiang Cheng squeezes him tighter. “Stupid, I don't care about that.” He pauses then adds. “All I care about is having my brother safe and healthy.”

Wei Wuxian gives them both time to process each other's words. “I'm safer now than I have been in a long time and with Wen Qing in Lotus Pier I'll never have to worry about my health.”

They spend the rest of the day discussing everything and nothing at all.

It's late evening when they reach the next town, a band of rain following close on their heels as they make their way to the closest inn.

The next morning shows no sign of the weather letting up so they make arrangements to stay another night, spending the day restocking and relaxing in their rooms.

When they make their way down for dinner that night, they hear about the escalation in a nearby haunting. They take notes and by the time everyone's plate is all but cleared a plan has been agreed upon for them to try and cleanse the area at first light.

The next morning they pack up, have a hearty breakfast, then set out into the woods with a local guide who chats the whole way. Wei Wuxian keeps up, pulling vital information on the case as well as potentially related local lore.

The guide slows, stopping short of the break in the trees that leads to the circular clearing.

“It wasn't always like this. If you can clear the area for us, our village will be eternally grateful.”

“We'll do our best. If you want to head back, we'll return as soon as we finish,” Jiang Cheng reassures the guide with a swift nod.

The guide bows deeper than necessary then all but flees.

The clearing is almost perfectly round with nothing but sparse patches of dried grass and mud-scuffed rocky outcroppings covering the ground. Each of the bordering trees shows signs of fire damage, but only on the side facing the clearing.

“I’m gonna set up a few arrays if you want to check the nearby woods,” Wei Wuxian says, getting to work in the center.

The second array is taking shape when there’s movement directly behind Wei Wuxian. He looks up expecting Jiang Cheng but finds empty space instead. The hair on his arms stands on end but he shakes off the feeling and gets back to work. The movement returns as he finishes the array but he ignores it knowing Jiang Cheng would have—should have—announced himself.

“A-Cheng?” he calls, walking the perimeter. When he receives no response he tries again, then again. This time when he hears movement he spins, talisman in hand ready to attack.

“Hey! What the hell? Didn’t you hear me answer you the first time?” Jiang Cheng says.

Wei Wuxian shakes his head no, lowering the talisman but not his heightened senses. “It must be a side effect of whatever is going on.”

Jiang Cheng crosses to examine Wei Wuxian’s work. “That’s not your normal revelation array.”

“It’s a variation created after a particularly tricky night hunt. It should force whatever is out here into the open no matter where it falls on the spectrum.”

Kneeling to get a better look at the sigils Jiang Cheng says, “You should work on the curriculum for theoretical and practical cultivation.” He looks up, adding, “Your contributions would be greatly appreciated.”

“We’ll figure it all out when I come home,” Wei Wuxian says, offering Jiang Cheng a hand up.

Once he’s on his feet again Jiang Chang looks to the sky. “Let’s get this taken care of before it starts raining again.”

Wei Wuxian makes quick work of activating the first array. The wind picks up immediately, the canopy shaking violently under the onslaught. Before either of them can do more than guard against the attack an amorphous shadow rushes from the trees.

Wei Wuxian takes the initial hit and finds himself on his back halfway across the clearing. By the time he finds his feet again, Jiang Cheng has engaged the beast and is forcing it toward the second array.

Chenqing is in hand before Wei Wuxian consciously reaches for it, the melody distracting the beast enough for Jiang Cheng to land a series of well placed attacks. For a minute they have the upper hand.

The beast shrinks in on itself for the briefest of moments before exploding out and fully engulfing Jiang Cheng in shadow; Wei Wuxian is across the clearing a heartbeat later, diving into the swirling mass. His hand makes contact with muscle and when Zidian flashes to life Wei Wuxian closes his grip and tugs the other body against him. They stumble into the light,

the shadows roaring behind them and have only a moment to breathe before the mass descends upon them again.

“The second array won’t work,” Wei Wuxian calls out as he pulls a talisman from his sleeve.

When Sandu slices the shadow down the center, both halves surge toward Jiang Cheng in unison, forcing him to the side. “What do you need?” he asks, dragging in a breath as he takes a defensive stance between Wei Wuxian and the mass.

“I’m going to try Eradication.”

Jiang Cheng nods then lunges back into the fight.

The song fills the clearing with almost no effect and the longer Wei Wuxian plays the more angry he becomes. He knew it was a long shot but seeing the complete lack of effect his efforts are having breeds doubt in his mind. He pauses to drag in a deep breath and doesn’t immediately continue.

“Why did you stop?” Jiang Cheng yells, glancing over his shoulder to check on Wei Wuxian.

The distraction is all the beast needs to strike, a tendril of inky darkness lashing out to wrap around Jiang Cheng’s leg and drag him from his feet; in the chaos, Jiang Cheng disappears into the undulating mass.

Torn between wanting to dive back into the shadows or giving in and pulling resentment back into his body, Wei Wuxian settles for a middle ground. The second array scrubs away easily, leaving the ground smoothe for another attempt. In his haste to finish the design, Wei Wuxian scuffs his hand on one of the jagged rocks; this oversight goes unnoticed until the moment the array activates with an explosion that collapses into a sucking vortex.

Wei Wuxian blinks stars from his eyes as he scrambles to his feet, frantically turning to search the clearing for Jiang Cheng and the beast.

A hand on his arm yanks him around and he finds himself face to face with a frantic Jiang Cheng.

“...Wuxian! Wei Wuxian!”

Wei Wuxian can make out the shape of his name on his brother’s lips but the ringing in his ears masks any other sounds. He pulls free and turns to check the array only to find the area decimated.

Jiang Cheng rounds in front of him again and grabs him with both hands. “Sit down!” he yells, forcing Wei Wuxian to the ground—kneeling in front of him.

“Are you injured?” Wei Wuxian asks, his voice sounds loud in his head and he wonders if he's yelling.

“Don't worry about me.” Wei Wuxian reads Jiang Cheng’s response but it doesn't make sense until he's wiping his sleeve across Wei Wuxian’s temple; the material coming away red.

Wei Wuxian pulls back with a startled “Ah,” and tries to swipe his own sleeve across the same area only for Jiang Cheng to capture his hand and force it down again.

“Stop that.”

Wei Wuxian sits still, watching as Jiang Cheng opens a qiankun pouch and starts pulling clean gauze and ointments from its depth. He smiles, understanding the care that went into that pouch—a matching one had been pressed into his hands shortly after spiriting everyone from the Jin camps.

Jiang Cheng fusses over him until he knows the abrasions are only superficial and Wei Wuxian’s hearing has returned.

“I’m fine, Jiang Cheng.” Wei Wuxian catches the other’s wrist. “I’ve had worse. Are *you* okay?”

Jiang Cheng shakes his head no as he collapses into the lotus pose, all fight drained from him. Before Wei Wuxian can ask again Jiang Cheng looks up, eyes haunted as he says, “You weren’t moving, I couldn’t get the thing off of me and you were just *laying* there.” He shudders, hard enough for Wei Wuxian to clearly see and says nothing else.

The sight of Jiang Cheng distraught and without words renders Wei Wuxian silent as well. His attention slips to Jiang Cheng’s hand which still holds Wei Wuxian’s arm tight, when he looks back up he’s startled to see tears catching on Jiang Cheng’s eyelashes. All at once the wind is knocked from Wei Wuxian and he’s back in Nightless City with Jiang Yanli between them. He takes a pained, punched out breath and rushes to his knees to gather Jiang Cheng against him. Jiang Cheng’s arms are unyielding, locking around him immediately. Neither acknowledge the half muffled sob or the spreading spot of dampness over Wei Wuxian’s heart.

The day is all but gone when they finally collect themselves enough to scrub away the arrays and make their way back to the inn where they order baths. Once they are both clean, they venture back down to the dining area for as hearty of a meal as they can manage.

The town leader finds them as they are finishing up, the concern on her face only lifting once they assure her the beast has been eradicated.

“We are truly fortunate to have such esteemed cultivators passing through. How can we show our gratitude?” She asks with a deep bow.

“Take care and do not hesitate to reach out to any of the great sects if you find yourself in need again.” Jiang Cheng says as Wei Wuxian guides her out of the bow.

They part ways with heartfelt thanks and several well wishes, making their way to their room where Wei Wuxian slaps a silencing talisman on the door frame and doesn’t hesitate throwing himself on the bed with a loud groan. He lays there listening to Jiang Cheng shuffle around the room for a second before he too settles on the adjacent bed.

“I’ve missed night hunting with you, but I don’t think I can go through that again.” Jiang Cheng says into the silence a few minutes later.

Wei Wuxian hoists himself up right again. “We’ll figure it out. It...”

“No.” Jiang Cheng interrupts, a scowl on his face as he sits up. “No, Wei Wuxian, I can’t be an accessory to you throwing yourself into danger again. I almost lost you. Again! I... I can’t do this.”

Wei Wuxian scoots to the edge of his bed so he’s closer to his brother. “It wasn’t that bad, I was never unconscious. I was on my feet almost immediately after the explosion. I think we were both seeing illusions... I couldn’t find you, the whole clearing was empty, you were nowhere to be seen until you grabbed ahold of me.”

Jiang Cheng shakes his head again. “I would never forbid you from night hunting but unless I absolutely have to, I can’t participate in one with you right now.” He takes a shuddering breath. “I’ve seen you die once, I don’t want to see it again.”

Wei Wuxian nods, letting the topic fall away. “We should get some rest.”

Wei Wuxian listens to Jiang Cheng sleep for a while before finally following.

The next morning they dress, gather all their items and take breakfast with little more than small talk. By the time they leave, they’ve lapsed into complete silence.

Wei Wuxian *hates* it.

They’re well on their way when he finally snaps.

“If we’re going to spend the rest of the time not talking, you can go home. The last thing I want is to fight.”

“Can we not just walk in silence?”

Wei Wuxian tries to ignore the aggravation in Jiang Cheng’s voice. “Not without whatever this is festering. You’re upset...”

Jiang Cheng stops in the middle of the road, hands clenched into fists. “That doesn’t make it your job to fix it! I’m not one of your problems to be solved, I’m allowed to just be angry!”

Wei Wuxian chews his tongue for a second. “You’re not my problem to fix and you absolutely are allowed to be angry, but if you think you can lash out at me like Yu-furen used to, you’re mistaken. The war changed both of us too much for that dynamic to work.”

Jiang Cheng reels back like he’s been slapped, the hand with Zidian jerking behind his back. “How dare you!”

“You did it on the way to Lanling in front of every sect leader. I didn’t say anything then because I honestly didn’t expect to make it out alive, but don’t stand there now shocked, thinking for a second you’re above her tactics.”

The wind picks up around them, crisp with the bite of frost despite the crystal clear skies, neither of them backing down.

Emotion flickers across Jiang Cheng’s face, there and gone too fast for Wei Wuxian to name. He says nothing when Jiang Cheng stalk off, taking a moment to pull Lan Wangji’s cloak from his qiankun pouch.

Wei Wuxian sighs, aggravation leaning toward resignation. Taking a deep breath he leans his head back, letting the sun warm his cheeks before continuing toward the next village.

The landscape shifts around them, the mountains growing until they surround them on all sides. As the trade hub peeks into existence, its chimney smoke whitening the sky in the distance long before the roofs are visible, the enormity of the town becomes more evident.

When they hit the gates Wei Wuxian clears his throat. “Let’s find an inn and have dinner.”

Jiang Cheng, who had spent the entirety of the day growing more and more stiff, exhales, his shoulders dropping by the smallest of increments.

They take dinner in their shared room, both tired and beyond their earlier disagreement by the time they settle into their respective beds. Sleep finds Wei Wuxian quickly, the exhaustion of the day catching up to him quickly. He sleeps soundly, his dreams blissfully quiet.

The smell of warm food draws him from his slumber. He groans, body aching, but smiles when he sees the spread of dishes Jiang Cheng has arranged on the small table. He mumbles a sleepy “Morning,” as he slides from the bed to the floor.

Across from him Jiang Cheng scoffs. “Where are your manners? I know Jie-jie raised you better.” Despite the turmoil from the day before, his words hold no bite.

Wei Wuxian smiles, big and bright, and Jiang Cheng pulls a face. “Stop, I changed my mind, I just want peace and quiet this morning.”

“Absolutely not. You might not miss me while I’m gone, but I will miss you.”

Jiang Cheng snaps a set of chopsticks down on the table next to Wei Wuxian’s empty bowl. “Who says I won’t miss you. Eat.”

Wei Wuxian is glad the nourishment and rest the night before was able to break some of the tension between them. They finish breakfast then take turns dressing, Wei Wuxian dons the black and deep purple ensemble that had been left in his room those first days. He takes the time to make sure every layer is in place before stepping around the divider. The pride and simple joy in Jiang Cheng’s eyes when he sees him in the Jiang colors is enough to banish any lingering concern in Wei Wuxian’s heart.

The walk to the mountain path is taken in silence, comfortable in a way yesterday hadn't been. Their steps slow as the imposing red gate comes into view. They are alone, and have been the whole morning, thanks to the maze array they entered shortly after crossing the river toward the mountain.

Jiang Cheng turns to face Wei Wuxian, coming to a full stop a few hundred feet from the gate. "You're coming back, aren't you?"

Wei Wuxian blinks and for a moment they are at the base of another mountain outside Yiling, he shudders, the phantom pain cutting across his abdomen. "As soon as I am able, I will follow my mother's footsteps off the mountain and to the lakes of Lotus Pier."

Jiang Cheng looks to the gate, his jaw working a few times before he finally says. "Don't wander as long as she did. You've got family waiting for you."

"I won't." With a brief squeeze to Jiang Cheng's shoulder Wei Wuxian is off.

The imposing doors swing open as he approaches, waiting. He turns to look over his shoulder as he steps over the threshold and has enough time to nod once to Jiang Cheng before they shut again of their own accord.

Wei Wuxian looks around and finds himself alone for only a moment, footsteps pulling his attention to a figure that seems to have materialized from thin air.

"You have your Mother's eyes and your Father's nose," Baoshan Sanren says with a smile as Wei Wuxian quickly bows. She gently guides him upright. "Your physician will be upset if you pull a stitch."

Wei Wuxian smiles back, surprised but not displeased by the immortal's warmth. "Qing-jie will find a reason to be upset with me either way."

Baoshan Sanren nods, then turns away. She waves for him to follow over her shoulder. "Perhaps you should sleep more. Come, we have much to talk about and only a short time to do so."

Wei Wuxian hums without meaning to do so, and mortifyingly she hears him. Her smile is bright when she glances back at him.

"Your heart is elsewhere. I could offer you the whole wide world and you would still be homebound as soon as the snow melts."

Wei Wuxian wants to deny her words but can't. Instead he says, "This one is honored just to be given an invitation, Laoshi."

Turning her attention back to the path, Baoshan Sanren says, "Tell me your story while we walk. That way lunch can be a pleasant affair."

“All of it?” Wei Wuxian asks, unsure which half to begin.

“Of course all of it.” She drops back to walk beside him and loops her arm around his elbow, resting her hand on his forearm. “Popo Wen is not the only Grandmother you have.”

Wei Wuxian could cry, but instead he smiles and starts with what he remembers. “They had a donkey, of all things, when I was little. Mother would ride it with me in her lap—if I wasn’t on my Father’s shoulders.”

His tale takes the entirety of their walk and he can’t help but lapse into silence after he recounts his second time in Qionggqi Path and the turbulent dash for survival that followed. “It’s been a whirlwind ever since the conference,” he confesses. “Despite being unconscious as much as I have, I haven’t had any real rest since arriving.”

After a moment Baosan Sanren asks, “Have you finished the seal to ensure Wen Qionglin will be safe from outside influence?”

Wei Wuxian shakes his head. “Not yet. I’ve started a few times but I haven’t had a chance to craft it.”

She hums, soft and melodic. “We’ll finish it before you go. I know we have suitable materials on hand.”

Wei Wuxian glances at her, filled with surprise despite everything he had already seen. “Laoshi is too kind.”

Baoshan Sanren pats his arm. “That will be the smallest of our projects while you are here.”

“And the biggest?” Wei Wuxian asks because he can’t help but be curious.

They have made it to the paved courtyard of her mountain home. Around them life bustles, preparing for the upcoming season. “Sometimes, when fires are extinguished, embers remain, waiting to be breathed back to life.”

Before Wei Wuxian can react, Baoshan Sanren turns her attention to an approaching disciple. “Xiao Xingchen, if you could show Wei Wuxian to the living quarters and get him settled in before dinner.”


“Yes, Laoshi,” Xiao Xingchen says with a smile and bow to the both of them.

Wei Wuxian finds himself overwhelmed with emotions. The man before him is full of life and his potential for greatness is as unmistakable as the intelligence that sharpens his gaze.



Faced with the immediate knowledge that this young man's soul will remain untarnished by the violence Xue Yang was made of, Wei Wuxian finally accepts, without a shadow of a doubt, that his actions against the younger demonic cultivator were justified.

“Thank you, Laoshi. It’s nice to meet you, Shishu.”

Chapter End Notes

I promise I have read every comment from the last few chapters and as soon as I find the spoons to reply with more than a  I'll jump in and yell with the rest of y'all

In the meantime you can find me on [tumblr](#) and [twitter](#) but I'm most active here and in a few servers on discord, like [Haven](#), which is a wonderful writing focused server, and [Danmei Destination](#) which is all things, well, Danmei lol

AND if anyone is interested, I've got side stories already lined up for this universe so don't forget to subscribe to the series if you're interested  

Home

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for putting up with the time between updates on the last two chapters, both are better for the wait and I can say with full confidence that I am pleased with how this story has turned out.

As always! all the love in the world to [MsJulia](#) for making sure my love hate relationship with commas doesn't embarrass me and helped tweak a few areas to perfection.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

An ungainly banging at the Jingshi doors startles Lan Wangji out of his sleep. Fear and trepidation hum through his veins as he snatches the outer robe draped over the end of the bed and quickly makes his way across the darkened room. He's greeted with a choked "Hanguang-jun," as Jin Ling all but throws himself against Lan Wangji.

There's a beat of stilted confusion and for a horrifying moment, Lan Wangji thinks he will be told someone has brought Wei Ying's body back. Lan Wangji wraps his arms around the trembling form and Jin Ling lets out a choked sob, clinging tighter.

Neither of these actions dispels the horrible images searing in Lan Wangji's mind. Taking a deep breath Lan Wangji hugs the boy tight once more, then gently presses him back so he can see his face.

"Jin Ling," he starts, giving the boy a moment to look up, "speak clearly. What is wrong."

"There's something... It's all different," he trips over his words, pausing to shake his head.

Lan Wangji resists the urge to sigh. It's his fault for asking an open-ended question when Jin Ling is so obviously distressed. "What is all different?" he tries again.

"My memories, I can... I have..." He hiccups around another sob, fresh tears spilling from his eyes. "My parents are alive?" His voice shakes and fear makes the phrase a question.

Lan Wangji's first instinct is to dispute the boy but as he attempts to choose his next words his mind supplies him with countless memories of the happy young family during his trips out and their visits to Cloud Recesses.

"Your Father is Sect Leader Jin." Lan Wangji says with the kind of certainty that only comes with irrefutable knowledge—the sky is blue, the grass is green. "He took command," here his mind pulls up only shadows. He knows his attendance at the ceremony would have been required, duty and sect politics demanding his presence, but he doesn't remember the event.

Shadowed images of an argument within the walls of Koi Tower mingle with the gruesome scene of bodies being returned to the grand hall. For a moment, Lan Wangji knows with absolute certainty that Jin Zixuan can not possibly be the sect leader, knows in his bones that the sect heir died in Qiongqi Path, killed the day Wei Ying was supposed to join everyone for Jin Ling's full month celebration.

Jin Ling is still shaking where he has a grip on Lan Wangji's sleeve. "Hanguang-jun, what's happening? Is this real?" The open expression on Jin Ling's face strips away his always present stoic facade, leaving a childlike wonder and hope in its wake.

Lan Wangji brushes Jin Ling's loose hair back from his face like he's done to Sizhui a thousand times. "I believe the changes are real, however we will reach out to Lanling to confirm."

"I should go home," Jin Ling says, looking over his shoulder but not releasing Lan Wangji. "I could go home and see them."

Lan Wangji hums. "If you wish. However, you should wait for daylight." When Jin Ling does not react Lan Wangji adds, "I cannot imagine what you are experiencing, but you should think of your safety first."

Jin Ling nods, his arms falling back to his sides. He hesitates, scuffing one of his booted feet against the floor for a moment. "Umm, Hanguang-jun, can I...?" His eyes flick from Lan Wangji to the far side of the Jingshi where a spare bed has been tucked since Sizhui was small.

"Would you like to stay?" Lan Wangji motions to the room behind them.

"You don't mind?" Jin Ling exhales like a weight has been lifted.

Lan Wangji rests his hand on Jin Ling's shoulder. "Family does not mind sharing. Come, would you like tea, or just to rest?"

"Just rest, please."

Lan Wangji steps aside, guiding Jin Ling further into the room, and keeps his voice soft as he asks, "Would you care for another hug?"

Jin Ling shakes his head. "I think I'm okay now."

With a nod Lan Wangji closes the doors. "Good night, Jin Ling. We will contact Lanling, and your parents, in the morning."

"Thank you, Hanguang-jun."

Lan Wangji takes breakfast with Jin Ling, having drafted and sent both a spiritual and a physical message beforehand. They discuss their next steps and after a little deliberation, Jin Ling decides to stay in Cloud Recesses to continue researching the night hunt. Lan Wangji

walks him to the guest quarters to retrieve Zizhen, leaving the two with instructions to collect Jingyi and scour the library for the creature that attacked Wei Ying. He watches them go for a moment before turning in the direction of the infirmary with the intention of spending the first part of the morning at Sizhui's bedside. Halfway there he spots Lan Xichen, and redirects to intercept him.

"Xiongzhong, might I have a moment of your time?" he asks.

Lan Xichen's eyes flick toward a healer passing on the next walkway and back. "Of course, Wangji, how are you this morning?"

"Concerned, but hopeful."

"Any leads on Wei Wuxian's whereabouts?" Lan Xichen asks, motioning at the path, encouraging Lan Wangji to continue walking if he wants.

Lan Wangji shakes his head. "Not yet. The juniors will be in the library researching the creature after breakfast."

Xichen nods, opening his mouth to speak but pauses when Lan Wangji abruptly stops. "Wangji?" He asks, concern evident in his voice.

"My apologies," Lan Wangji says as an image of Wei Ying sitting at a table with scrolls spread before him and a shaft of sunlight casting his face in shadow comes to mind.

"Xiongzhong," he finally continues, glancing around at the empty courtyard. "Do you remember Jin Ling's full month celebration?"

"Of course," he answers immediately. "It was nearly a catastrophe when Jin Guangshan imprisoned Wei Wuxian—Jin shao furen was beside herself."

"Imprisoned," Lan Wangji repeats as he reaches for memories of the event. It's disconcerting to only see mist covered shadows instead of crisp images.

Lan Xichen's brows furrow, "Yes. When he arrived with Jin-zongzhu."

Lan Wangji can see in his own mind the pieces rearranging to fit together, can hear Jiang Yanli cry out as Wei Ying is forced to his knees by Jin cultivators outside the hall. Another fleeting memory joins the last: Wei Ying in the safety of Lotus Pier telling of an attack in the forest outside of Gusu. Lan Wangji shudders at the pain so clear in Wei Ying's voice as he spoke of everything that had occurred before and after.

"This must have been the beast that sent him back," Lan Wangji says, his eyes wandering in the direction of the infirmary.

"I will sit with Sizhui until you return," Lan Xichen says, clearly sensing the direction of Lan Wangji's split concern. "Go, find answers."

Lan Wangji bows and turns back to the library. He finds Lan Jingyi, Jin Ling and Ouyang Zizhen surrounded by books. "I have more information concerning the incident," he says softly, as he clears a place and settles next to the trio.

All eyes are on Lan Wangji as he begins. “On the day of Jin Ling’s full month celebration there was a skirmish between Wei Ying and Jin Zixun. Jin Zixun intended to prevent Wei Ying from participating and also force him to lift a curse he had not cast.

“Jin Zixuan arrived but his de-escalation attempts were ineffective. What he could never have known when he stepped between the two men was that Wei Ying had already lost control of his cultivation which left his feared Ghost General in a rampage without guidance.

“The tragedy that followed, compounded by the heartbreaking loss at the Pledge Conference organized by Jin Guangshan, irrevocably changed the lives of everyone involved and became the final catalyst for the siege on the Burial Mounds that ended with the death of Wei Ying and anyone under his protection.”

“But Mother and Father...” Jin Ling falls silent when Lan Wangji turns his attention to him.

“When Wei Ying threw himself in front of the beast in the forest, he was sent back to Qiongqi Path where he was able to save Jin Zixuan,” Lan Wangji continues.

Lan Jingyi sits up, face lighting up as he yelps, “Yanli-ayi?!”

Lan Wangji cuts his eyes to him, silently reprimanding him for his outburst.

“How will our lives change now?” Ouyang Zizhen asks, clearly still processing everything Lan Wangji just said.

“How will we be able to determine the changes being made?” Lan Jingyi adds, perking up. “Can anyone else remember our history...” He tilts his head. “I mean, the first history? Do we get to keep the memories?”

“The changes were made in the past,” Jin Ling interjects, glancing at Lan Wangji. “What happens if our memories don’t line up? What happened to the lives we would have theoretically lived? Why can’t I remember more?” The last is added quietly, mostly to himself.

Lan Wangji hums. “I believe it will work similar to a curse. The rest of the world will be how it’s been since Wei Ying arrived back in Qiongqi Path, the changes already long instilled. However, where you all are concerned, any new memories will arrive in waves—spreading like ripples from a stone cast into a lake. The surface will still once more, but what was once at the top will come to lie beneath.”

Jin Ling scowls, rubbing his thumb across the back of his hand.

“But you still remember,” Lan Jingyi points out, ever helpful.

“He’s Senior Wei’s true love! Of course he would remember the original history,” Ouyang Zizhen exclaims, pressing forward on the table between them.

Lan Wangji redirects the conversation. “We will ask others to confirm what they remember.” He gives the young men a moment to nod before adding, “I would like to imagine that my

connection to Wei Ying will allow me the privilege of remembering the original history, as Ouyang-gongzi says.”

Ouyang Zizhen sits up with a smile then makes a face. “I can’t remember anything new.”

“What about Senior Wei?” Lan Jingyi asks quietly, eyes cast to the table.

Lan Wangji lets his focus fall beyond the small group around him. “I can only hope he is safe and will return to us.”

Lan Wangji leaves the juniors to the expanse of the library and makes his way to the infirmary where Lan Xichen is waiting on the veranda.

“Xiongzhang, any changes?” Lan Wangji asks with a bow, despite knowing Xichen would have sent for him immediately had there been even the slightest of improvements.

Lan Xichen smiles, bowing to Lan Wangji in turn. “His vitals are good. They expect him to wake before evening.”

“Thank you for sitting with him.”

“Wangji, watching my nephew is no imposition. You would do the same for me if our places were reversed,” Xichen says, his voice fond, bearing only the softest rebuke.

Lan Wangji nods, the briefest of movements, but says nothing for a moment, deliberating. “Do you have a few minutes you could spare? We are working on a theory and need input from others.”

The brothers make their way back into the room where they settle at the low table across from Sizhui’s bed. An assistant brings a tea service as soon as they are seated.

After they have both sipped from their respective cups Lan Wangji says, “We believe changes were made to our history. Jin Ling and the others share memories of events that no longer exist.”

Lan Xichen hums with a knowing smile. “I have never known Wei Wuxian to step down from a challenge, and what bigger challenge than altering history itself? How may I assist your research?”

For a moment Lan Wangji considers changing the subject, then decides growth comes from all avenues and facing harsh memories must be done from time to time. “Do you remember the afternoon of Jin Ling’s One Month Celebration?”

Lan Xichen taps his cheek, humming for a second. “Jin Zixun caused a scene, exclaiming he’d mortally wounded Wei Wuxian during an attempt to abduct Sect Leader Jin in Qiongqi Path.”

“Do you remember the original events of that afternoon?”

Lan Xichen tilts his head and Lan Wangji feels himself soften as he thinks of all the times Sizhui has done the same thing.

“Original events?” Xichen asks, feeling the words out. “I don’t...” He pauses, shakes his head, then says, “I feel like there is something I am missing but the more I try to remember the further it slips.”

Lan Wangji nods. “What do you remember from the weeks following?”

Lan Xichen’s shoulders droop and Lan Wangji can see the hurt in his eyes when he turns them away. “I should have done more to protect you. Both of you.”

"How do you remember the events?"

Lan Xichen describes Lan Wangji’s immediate departure with Jin Zixuan after Wei Wuxian was taken away, the Wens’ relocation and the defeat of Xue Yang the morning after Wei Wuxian’s escape from Lanling’s cells. “I know there is little we could have done to save him from the pain that occurred prior to Jin Guangshan’s demise but that does not mean that I excuse my neutrality in Wei Wuxian’s defense during the events in the Burial Mounds cave. I owe him a great debt, despite that he has assured me several times over that it has been paid in full.”

Lan Wangji hums, turning his attention back to Sizhui with his side and shoulder bandaged—an image of Wei Ying, unconscious, with similar bandages comes to him. He feels the sting of tears. “I do not have memories of the changes that have been made,” he confesses. “There is still only our original past and snippets of what Wei Ying accomplished after returning.”

“A-Zhan,” Lan Xichen says, reaching across the table to press his palm against Lan Wangji’s shoulder. “I’m sure your memories will return, or... arrive anew. If memories have begun to change for the others, then there is no reason to believe they will not come to you also.”

Lan Wangji does not respond, focusing instead on his son. He brushes bangs from his eyes and leans down to press his forehead to Sizhui’s temple.

Lan Xichen rubs his back for a moment then leaves them alone.

Lan Wangji is sitting at the window when Lan Qiren arrives. “Shufu,” he greets, rising from his seat.

“Sit, Wangji, there is no need for formalities in times like this.”

Lan Qiren settles near the bed, his hand resting on Sizhui’s ankle. Lan Wangji takes a moment to reflect on the action, knowing Lan Qiren used to do the same for Xichen and himself when they were injured or sick.

“I will sit with Sizhui, if you would like to greet Jin-zongzhu and Jin-furen at the gates. You should have enough time to collect Jin Rulan on the way.”

Lan Wangji smooths the covers along the edge of the bed, hesitating.

“I will send for you if he wakes up,” Lan Qiren assures.

Lan Wangji thanks his uncle then heads to the library to collect Jin Ling, wondering when Lan Qiren began using the young heir’s courtesy name. Once collected, they set a quick pace to the gate, the delegation coming into view a few minutes later.

Jin Ling is off like a shot as soon as they are clear of the last bend. No sooner than he reaches his parents does he find himself bundled into a fierce group hug. Jiang Yanli is the first to pull back, checking him over to ensure he is healthy and whole.

From his place just outside the gates, Lan Wangji can see the rigid line in Jin Ling’s shoulders. He intends to remain out of the way but an excited gasp draws his attention with just enough time to catch the gangly teenager who has thrown himself at him.

“Shi-jiu!”

Lan Wangji holds the newcomer against him as an onslaught of memories and emotions rage through him. “A-Zhu,” he breathes and has to force himself to let her go to get a better look at her. A quick glance confirms she is a spitting image of her mother, with intelligent eyes and a brave set to her shoulders. She is taller than the last time he saw her and for a wild moment Lan Wangji is struck with the fact that this is also the *first* time he has seen her.

“Shi-jiu?” Her voice takes on an edge of worry and oh, that hurts Lan Wangji more than he likes to admit.

He shifts her in his arms and all at once he remembers when she was just an infant, smaller than any baby he’d ever seen. There had been so much joy at her full month celebration; Wei Ying had teased them about this one going better, as a two year old Jin Ling giggled in his arms.

She lays her hand on his cheek and her expression morphs into a mirror image of her mother’s concern. She glances toward her family in time to see Jin Ling finally break down in tears and be pulled close to their father. “Shi-jiu?” she says again, turning her attention back to Lan Wangji. Before he can answer she looks up and over his shoulder. “Where’s Da-jiu?”

Jiang Yanli crosses to them, saving him from having to form the words. Her hand is warm on his arm when she says, “Da-jiu went on a night hunt and hasn’t come back yet.”

Lan Wangji applauds her ability to keep her voice calm while explaining a potential tragedy to a child. “This is why Luo-ayi is leading a group of cultivators to join the scouts from Gusu.”

Lan Wangji has to look up and away or his niece's tears will surely be his downfall. He holds her tighter for a moment more. Jin Lizhu insists on staying pressed against Lan Wangji’s side while the small group makes their way into Cloud Recesses; Lan Wangji lets the sight of Jin Ling sandwiched between both of his parents buoy his heart.

They follow the paths on instinct and it isn't until they are outside a lovely appointed residence that Lan Wangji realizes it's their cottage—because they are family and visit often enough to have their own residence inside the family complex.

He sees flashes of himself and Wei Wuxian while they helped build the structures the summer of Jin Ling's fourth year. Lan Wangji's heart clenches at a memory of Wei Ying's laughter trickling down as he balances—out of sight, somewhere overhead—on a crossbeam while fitting a rafter into place. A squeeze to his hand draws his attention back to the here and now.

"I'm sure Da-jiu will be fine," Jin Lizhu says with a definitive nod and unmistakable confidence in her voice. "He taught me everything I know about trekking, he even taught me how to start a fire to keep warm, even if it's raining."

"Your Da-jiu is very resourceful and has proven himself cunning and resilient several times over," Lan Wangji says, because who is he to deny the truth?

She hums and swings their joined hands. Jin Ling looks over and Lan Wangji nods once knowing the motion is understood by the answering nod. They will do whatever it takes.

Lan Wangji ensures they are settled then excuses himself with an invitation to join him in the infirmary when they are ready.

Jiang Cheng's arrival is fury and pain sealed in a single storm. He sweeps into the infirmary and is brought up short at the sight of Sizhui bruised and unconscious. Lan Wangji stands, his eyes averted as Jiang Cheng wraps himself around his sister who had joined Lan Wangji here earlier in the afternoon. Wen Qing, accompanying her husband, rests her hand on Jiang Cheng's shoulder before she crosses to Lan Wangji.

"It was the beast," she says and when he nods she curses under her breath. "He always made it sound like we had more time. Did he know?"

Lan Wangji breathes through his heart constricting, the pain bracketed by the memory of himself and Wei Ying sitting in the Lotus Pier library. "We fought the morning he left," he says. Both times, he wants to add. "I wanted him to wait for me, but he insisted he and the juniors would be fine. He said it was a yao or a demon and they'd have it defeated before nightfall." Lan Wangji looks away. He has a memory of Wei Ying worrying if they'd spoken beyond their argument that morning and for a horrifying moment Lan Wangji can't remember either.

Her fingers lace with his and she pulls him into a tight hug. "He'll be back. He's a fool, but he wouldn't miss this for the world. From this moment on... this is what it was all for."

"How much do you remember?" he asks before he can stop himself. She makes an inquisitive hum, so he clarifies. "The juniors who were in the forest have memories of the way it was before Wei Ying changed the past as well as the timeline that grew from his changes. I have not been able to ask A-Yuan yet, but it appears everyone else only remembers the changed reality."

“I only have memories of life after he was sent back, but I am not a good data point since I would not have lived long in the other history.” She looks him over. “You do not share the memories that would be new?”

He looks away from the intensity of her knowing gaze. “I have pieces. They only come after a moment or occurrence reminds me of what is now real.” His fingers trail across Sizhui’s shoulder. “For me there is still only his death and rebirth and the life we lived from then until now.”

“If we do nothing else, we will ensure you remember the life you’ve had,” she says, squeezing his forearm. “It has been a good one.”

Lan Wangji stays with Sizhui through the night. Sizhui had started stirring before everyone left, easing into a lighter sleep in preparation for waking, and the last thing Lan Wangji wanted was him waking alone.

Some time past midnight Sizhui bolts upright with a strangled scream. When Lan Wangji moves to the bed and pulls him into his lap his son collapses against him immediately and buries his face in Lan Wangji’s neck. “A-die, Baba, he...” He drags in a shuddering breath. “Is Baba... did the beast...”

“Shh, we will discuss everything once we know you are well,” Lan Wangji says, hugging Sizhui tightly.

Sizhui chokes on another sob. “There’s too many thoughts, nothing makes sense.”

“Mn, we believe it is a side effect of the beast’s magic. When the beast attacked it appears it sent Wei Ying into the past, where he was able to make significant changes. Since you were on the battlefield with him, you and the others have memories from both histories.” He pauses to rub circles on Sizhui’s back. After a few minutes he continues, “I am perhaps not the best for discussing the exact changes made, but we can talk about the memory overlap, if you would like.” His son nods but doesn’t say anything immediately.

After a minute, Sizhui pulls back, his eyes full of concern that can easily be traced to his aunt. “Why would you not be the best for the task, A-die?”

Lan Wangji allows Sizhui to reposition himself before he answers. “Whatever magic is involved has affected me differently than others. Most of my memories are still from our first history.”

“So these new memories? They really happened?” Sizhui asks.

Lan Wangji nods. “Everyone I have asked assures me Wei Ying’s changes are real and he was successful in his efforts to better the lives of those he loves. Jiang Yanli and Jin Zixuan are alive... as is Jin Lizhu. I have seen them. I know things to have changed.”

“But you don’t remember,” Sizhui whispers knowingly.

Lan Wangji shakes his head. “What few memories I have are mere snippets, nothing more than reflections caught in a shattered mirror.”

Sizhui shifts himself back to the bed where he fidgets with the covers for a moment. “If Baba was sent back in time by the beast then he would have known what to expect when he faced the beast again.” When Sizhui’s eyes catch Lan Wangji’s again they are filled with tears. “If he knew what to expect and took the attack again, where is Baba now?”

Lan Wangji thinks of the best way to tell him; tries to channel Jiang Yanli’s soft tone. “We do not know.” He pauses to wipe Sizhui’s tears from his cheeks. “There are scouts searching, but they have found nothing so far.”

They lapse into silence and Lan Wangji feels his heart break a little more with each passing moment.

“Let me have the healer check you over before we continue.”

The healer, when they arrive, is efficient, checking the wounds and deeming them healed enough to remove the bandages. “If your head begins to ache, tell us immediately,” they warn before bidding them both good night.

When they are alone again, Sizhui asks, “Do you remember when we came here the first time?”

“You were feverish when I found you the first time,” Lan Wangji offers, knowing Sizhui has heard the story before.

Sizhui chews his lip, a tic Lan Wangji only remembers his son having after Wei Ying returned. “The second time, then, when you both brought me here, as a family?” Lan Wangji shakes his head, so Sizhui continues. “It was the middle of summer. Baba had come home and caused chaos in Lotus Pier again, then stole me away in the middle of the night.” He looks down, at his hands, a small smile blooming into existence. “You were waiting for us in the village outside the gates. I was excited to see you and didn’t think anything at all about what was happening.” He looks up now, catching Lan Wangji’s eyes. “We came here and Uncle was waiting at the gates.”

Like morning fog parting to reveal a summit far above, the memory comes to Lan Wangji, mesmerizingly beautiful in its reveal. Lan Xichen had laughed at them and teased them that they couldn’t abscond with their son until they were married, only for Wei Ying to turn away—fussing over A-Yuan—as he complained about the time it was taking.

“We one took our bows in front of a shrine built on the side of the road,” Wei Ying had joyfully threatened his soon to be brother-in-law.

Lan Wangji’s chest constricts at the memories, old and newly discovered.

“We did not elope as we did the first time.” He knows it’s true when he says it but he can not draw the images to mind. “I do not remember anything but our first vows at a small roadside shrine.”

After a moment Sizhui says, “My family survived.”

“Wen Qing will surely come to see you again in the morning,” Lan Wangji says as countless scenes of family gatherings filter through his mind. “The others have all prospered in their endeavors.”

They spend the rest of the early hours sharing stories back and forth. Lan Wangji is emotionally drained when the sun begins to brighten the horizon but he would not give up the time spent with his son. He kisses Sizhui’s forehead and tucks him in when he stretches out, exhaustion weighing heavier on his younger shoulders.

Nie Huaisang arrives after lunch and Lan Wangji knows instinctively that the timing is deliberate so he and his entourage could eat prior to entering Cloud Recesses. And when he seeks out Lan Wangji, following the paths to the Jingshi with practiced ease, Lan Wangji does not question it. “You have visited often.” He observes, letting the other man into his home.

Nie Huaisang tilts his head, considering, as he follows Lan Wangji to the table. They arrange themselves comfortably and he takes a sip from the cup of tea passed to him before answering. “Wei-xiong hosts when we visit. Yanli-jie asked me to come talk to you.” He takes another drink. “She says you have questions about Wei-xiong.”

“I have been checking with the others to gauge memory overlap.”

“Memory overlap?” Nie Huaisang asks, pausing to look down. He once would have had a fan obstructing his face and Lan Wangji realizes he hasn’t seen him hiding away since the cleansing of their mausoleum. “Ah, you mean what Wei-xiong said about him being from a different future?” Lan Wangji nods, and Nie Huaisang sits up straighter. “That was so long ago, Wangji-xiong. Do you think Wei-Xiong’s disappearance has something to do with that?”

Lan Wangji swirls the tea in his cup. “I know it.”

“Ah.” Nie Huaisang deflates. “Da-ge said Xichen-ge asked for trackers. We were hoping it was for something else.”

As soon as the juniors had returned without Wei Ying, Lan Xichen had reached out to Nie Mingjue for additional scouts. He had responded with a promise of his help and as many cultivators as were needed without hesitation and although Lan Wangji cannot pull memories of the bond shared between Wei Ying and the sect leader, he knows in his bones that Nie Mingjue would fight to the death for Wei Ying.

They sit in silence while they finish their drinks, any thoughts of more questions curtailed by Nie Huaisang’s contemplative look.

Lan Wangji escorts Nie Huaisang back to the main area a little while later, then finds the juniors, including Jin Lizhu, crowded around Sizhui’s bed in the infirmary.

“Hanguang-jun,” Ouyang Zizhen greets when he steps in.

“Have you all eaten?” Lan Wangji asks and gets nods from everyone.

“We were talking about the night hunt,” Lan Jingyi says quietly. “We were trying to determine if there was anything we could have done differently.” He swallows, and looks down at his hands. “Surely there was something we should have noticed.”

Lan Wangji kneels, laying his hand on the young disciple’s shoulder. “The four of you are the highest ranked cultivators of your age group. If there was something to be done I have no doubts that you would have done it.” He squeezes Jingyi’s shoulder. “Do not punish yourself for events that were out of your control.”

Lan Jingyi chews his lip but nods his understanding.

Jin Lizhu shifts closer to Jin Ling, the movement drawing everyone’s attention to her. She has a drawn look that does not belong on the face of such a bright thirteen year old.

Sizhui leans forward and takes her hand in his. “What is it, A-Zhu?”

She looks up at her cousin then to her brother and back to her captured hand, tears shimmer in her eyes. “Mama and Baba were talking last night and Mama’s worried Da-jiu might get caught in a loop, like a curse he can’t break. Baba says it’s unlikely. He says Da-jiu would know how to stop the loop but Mama said he would do it the same way every time if any of you were in danger.”

Lan Wangji feels a knife lance his heart. He had worried about that himself once they figured out what was happening.

She takes a breath, a single tear slipping down her cheek as she looks up to Lan Wangji. “Did he really throw himself in front of Da-ge?”

Lan Wangji opens his arms and she scrambles across to him. “If it happened the same way, Jin Ling and Zizhen had formed a defensive line near your Da-jiu when they were ambushed. It is entirely likely he saw the danger and placed himself between the beast and those he cares greatly for.” She clings to him tighter, so he rubs gentle circles on her back. “We have to trust Wei Ying knew what he was doing.”

Lan Wangji looks up at a knock on the door and finds Lan Xichen. “Xiongzhang?” Lan Xichen hesitates and Lan Wangji knows what he’s there to speak about. “It is okay to speak openly. They have been diligently working on alternative solutions if the need arises.”

Lan Xichen steps into the room so he can address everyone. “One of the scouts just arrived. They have expanded their search from the battlefield to the nearby forests but have found no signs of Wuxian. The group plans to split up. Half will work through the night while the others spread out to known locations he might travel to.”

Lan Wangji stands, then stoops to pick up A-Zhu from the ground, letting her curl against his chest as she had when she was a small child. “Thank you, Xiongzhang.” To the others he

adds, "Do not stay up too late, I'm going to take A-Zhu back."

"I'll go with you," Jin Ling says, standing too. "In the morning?" he says to the others.

Lan Wangji catches Sizhui's eyes snap to him before darting back to Jin Ling. He turns to face them, straightening that last little bit he usually doesn't have to with these juniors. "No one leaves Cloud Recesses until the threat has been fully eradicated. The last thing we need at this moment is for any of you to put yourselves in unnecessary danger." He pauses, looking at each one in turn. "Do not make Wei Ying's sacrifice be in vain."

There's a moment of silence then the group answers in unison, "Yes, Hanguang-jun."

With a nod he and Jin Ling follow Lan Xichen out of the room.

Despite his warning to the juniors Lan Wangji returns to the Jingshi with the intention of packing supplies to join the search party. He had stayed to be by Sizhui's side but now that his son is awake and will most likely be released in the morning, Lan Wangji no longer has an excuse to stay. A knock stops his packing.

"Are you planning to go look for the idiot?" Jiang Cheng asks when Lan Wangji greets him.

He lifts an eyebrow but answers honestly. "Unless something of substantial value is brought to light before morning, yes, I intend to join the search for Wei Ying."

Jiang Cheng nods, glancing toward the far wall. Lan Wangji follows his gaze to the sword stand that currently sits empty.

"Do you think he figured out how to defeat it?" Jiang Cheng finally asks.

Lan Wangji thinks of everything Wei Wuxian has accomplished during his lifetimes. "If there is anyone capable of overcoming an adversary such as this it would be Wei Ying."

Jiang Cheng scoffs but it's fond, accompanied by an eye roll and the slightest hint of a smile. The fact that Lan Wangji can tell these things strikes him silent.

"What's wrong?" Jiang Cheng asks and his open concern hits Lan Wangji in the chest. Perhaps he is not the only one capable of reading the other in this new life.

Jiang Cheng crosses to him but gives him a moment to speak when he shakes his head, a familiarity that does not help the emotions raging through Lan Wangji.

"There is much I do not remember," he finally says. The explanation is getting old, a constant reminder of his missing memories. His bruised heart is prodded again and again. "It is frustrating to know others have over a decade of memories and knowledge currently unavailable to me."

Jiang Cheng shifts. A nervous tick, Lan Wangji's brain unhelpfully supplies. "Do you only remember the life before he returned?" he finally asks and Lan Wangji remembers they have

not spoken since his arrival.

“I have some memories of the changes but the majority is what came before.”

Jiang Cheng shakes his head but there is no pity in his voice when he says, “I do not envy you at the moment. That time sounds like a nightmare.”

Lan Wangji looks out the open door, weary of the unknown. The thought of staying another night in the safety of his bed makes his skin crawl. If he was younger, he would just leave. He had only informed Xichen of his intentions to search during the war, then left.

Could he do it again? No one would blame him, surely.

“I have everything I need if you want to slip out tonight,” Jiang Cheng says, as if reading his mind. “Who would stop us?” He’s turned his attention fully to Lan Wangji and it’s clear he feels exactly the same. “It would almost be more unbelievable if we waited.”

Mind made up, Lan Wangji opens the qiankun pouch Wei Ying had once trusted him with only to discover a folded note with his name scrawled across the exposed top. He makes a punched out noise and Jiang Cheng is by his side immediately.

Just as the sun returns each day, have faith in me, my love. I will see you soon.

“He might be capable but he has proven more than once he can’t be trusted with his own safety,” Jiang Cheng points out.

It is a true statement but Lan Wangji refrains from admitting it out loud; instead he begins packing. He is efficient as always and pulls the strings tight only a few minutes later. Without a word they start down the path to the gates.

As they near the main courtyard Lan Wangji sees Jingyi running toward them.

“It’s Senior Wei,” he gasps, then turns back the way he came without another word. Lan Wangji and Jiang Cheng follow on his heels.

The crowd outside the infirmary parts when they enter, Jiang Cheng falling into step behind Lan Wangji with Jingyi bringing up the rear. Lan Wangji’s heart pounds in his ears, but even past that and even from a distance he can hear Wei Ying teasing the healers. Wen Qing’s reprimand in return is also not lost on anyone. Lan Wangji catches sight of Sizhui clutching Jin Ling in an adjacent room, but he does not pause, rounding into Wei Ying’s room without hesitation, determined to finally lay eyes on his beloved.

He is not prepared for the sight that greets him.

Sitting half disrobed in the middle of a medical cot sits Wei Ying, but not the Wei Ying Lan Wangji was privileged to love and cherish after his rebirth. No. This is Wei Ying, with his broader shoulders and sharp quicksilver eyes, and even while sitting Lan Wangji can tell they will stand nearly the same height. His attention catches on the Wen brand and he offhandedly

notes how far from identical his had been in comparison. Wen Qing steps back, giving him room to approach, then circles around behind him to usher everyone out. He hears Jiang Cheng protest but the door sliding shut drowns any further argument. Wei Ying shifts, as if to stand, and Lan Wangji moves without thought, closing the distance and dropping to his knees before him.

“Ah, Lan Zhan.” It isn’t until Wei Ying wraps his arms around Lan Wangji that he realizes he had already done the same to his husband. Wei Ying curls over him, more fully capable of wrapping himself around Lan Wangji now.

“Wen Qing said your memories haven’t settled yet,” Wei Ying says, when Lan Wangji calms a little. He nods, unable to trust himself. “Let’s do something about that, yeah?”

Wei Ying leans back a little from the embrace and maneuvers Lan Wangji until he can pull him close and kiss him. The kiss is slow, all consuming and when Wei Ying begins to draw Lan Wangji’s qi between them Lan Wangji opens himself and lets it flow unrestricted. When it cycles back to him he feels the warmth radiate out from his core. The added heat is new yet well known, sending shivers through his body as the flow of energy crawls up his spine, each vertebrae absorbing the power before letting it spill into the next.

With his eyes closed he doesn’t notice the darkness creeping in until they are both consumed. The liminal space takes shape, forming around Lan Wangji like Empathy. He is aware of Wei Ying beside him—can tell that he is in control—but the darkness is unsettling and he tenses.

“Ah, none of that,” Wei Ying says, stepping in front of him. “I promise it will be worth the pain.”

Around them the darkness shifts and with the force of a tsunami Lan Wangji’s memories return.

Lan Wangji surfaces to Wei Ying running his hand gently up and down his spine. The smooth motion calms him, as it has countless times before. He breathes through a stab of pain and remembers when Wei Ying first discovered his scars... scars that no longer pull the muscle or flesh uncomfortably. He chokes on a sob and clings tighter.

“How did you do it?” he finally asks when he can draw a breath enough to force himself away. Wei Ying is beautiful with love and hope so clearly written across his face. “How did you come back?”

“Laoshi believed my thoughts at the time of the attack were directly related to my final destination. So when it was clear I would have to take the blow again I tried to focus on us and the future we still have.” He leans forward to kiss Lan Wangji, soft and chaste. “I missed the mark by a bit but as soon as I could make it here I came.”

“Where did it take you?” Lan Wangji asks, his concern evident in his voice.

“Back to the battlefield but two days later this time. MianMian found me when she circled back to double check the area.”

Lan Wangji closes his eyes as Wei Ying brushes the hair from his shoulder. “I thought I lost you again.”

“I know, I’m sorry.”

Lan Wangji takes Wei Ying’s face in his hands. “No sorry between us” he says as he kisses him again.

After a moment Lan Wangji pulls back. “Was the beast defeated? Do we need to send more teams to locate them?”

Wei Ying shakes his head. “The first was defeated by the others and when the other one attacked the back line I sent a surge of power directly into him; he was dust before the explosion cleared.”

Lan Wangji nods. Despite knowing for a fact that his husband is more than capable of handling his own, he pulls back to get a better look at him because experience has taught him that sometimes Wei Ying can’t be the judge of *okay*. His side is bandaged exactly where it had been the first time and Lan Wangji can’t contain the pained sound he makes when he lays his hand on top of the offending material.

Wei Wuxian laughs, a breathy sound that’s still a little watery, and says, “It’s mostly healed now. Wen Qing says I should be well enough to resume normal duties by the end of the week.”

“Will it scar?”

Wei Wuxian lays his hand on top of Lan Wangji’s, “No more than it already was, and it looks like destroying the creature negated the original curse as well.”

Relief washes over Lan Wangji but he knows there’s something he’s overlooking, some well-known fact his brain has filed away as an everyday normalcy—something so common as to be taken for granted. While he thinks, he checks over Wei Ying again. As he bushes Wei Ying’s hair over his shoulder their conversation in the Lotus Pier library comes to mind. He remembers the drawn look on Wei Ying’s expressive face, the exhaustion weighing his shoulders down. None of that exists now. Even injured, Wei Ying is radiant.

Lan Wangji stills, his eyes snap to Wei Ying’s and he knows his hope is unmistakable. Slowly he allows his hand to migrate from Wei Ying’s side to his lower dantian; the unmistakable pulse of power greets him, reaching for him the same as he reaches for it.

“Wei Ying,” he breathes in awe.

Wei Wuxian smiles, soft and so full of love. “Sometimes when fires are extinguished, embers remain, waiting to be breathed back to life.”

There's a shuffle behind them, the slightest movement of a door in its tracks. Wei Wuxian's face lights up when he looks over Lan Wangji's shoulder.

Lan Wangji knows who he'll see when he turns.

"Hello ducklings," Wei Wuxian says, confirming the assumption as Lan Wangji turns, moving to sit next to Wei Ying. Wei Wuxian scoots closer then opens his arms wide. "Well, come on."

As they're swarmed by the five youngsters Lan Wangji can't help but feel whole for the first time in days. Their small group expands when Jiang Yanli leads her husband, brother, and in-laws into the room. Nie Mingjue and Huaisang remain in the hall—there but allowing the immediate family the space first.

Lan Wangji feels his heart overflow with more love than he's ever felt before. Sitting here, surrounded by so many people whose love for each other is more powerful than any force of nature, Lan Wangji remembers one of the most valuable lessons in his life.

Love should be unconditional, given fiercely to those you hold dear, for it was all you had in times both light and dark. Family, no matter how it is composed, should always be able to come together.

He slips his arm around Wei Ying's waist and kisses the crown of his head when Wei Ying leans into Lan Wangji's side. Later they will discuss the years that have passed and the changes in their lives, but for now Lan Wangji is happy to enjoy the opportunities given to them once again.

Chapter End Notes

The end!

but only in the formal sense!! Stay tuned for more from this universe shortly 💜

There are not enough words to properly express the absolute joy posting this has been for me! Every single one of you have made my days brighter in more ways than anyone will ever truly know. if you want to yell at me, you can find me on [tumblr](#) and [twitter](#) but I'm most active here and in a few servers on discord, like [Haven](#), which is a wonderful writing focused server, and [Danmei Destination](#) which is all things, well, Danmei lol

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